

***Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism:  
A Study of the Writings of  
Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song,  
and Aloysius Pieris.***

by  
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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has been composed entirely by myself and that it has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished by the use of quotation marks or set in a block quotation, and the sources of information have been acknowledged.

(Kenneth Fleming)



# **Abstract of Thesis**

This thesis is a study of the writings of three contemporary Asian Christian theologians - Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris - within the context of their dialogue with Buddhism. In addition to examining the method and content of their dialogue, the intent of the thesis is to discern the impact of the dialogue upon their respective theologies, and engage the three theologians in an inter-contextual discussion that critically affirms their value for both Asian and Western theology.

The thesis is a study in Asian contextual theology. The major reality that distinguishes the Asian context from others is the existence of many religions. Asian theologians immersed in their contexts are drawn into interreligious dialogue in order to reformulate and communicate their Christian faith. The three theologians at the heart of this study have all entered into an in-depth dialogue with Buddhism, a religion that has had an immense influence upon the lives of Asian peoples.

A number of common theological issues emerge out of their dialogue with Buddhism. These fall into three main areas: Christian identity, theological method, and liberation theology; within which other issues related to spirituality, mission, theology of religions, doctrine and praxis, and christology also arise. An important aim of the thesis is to contribute towards a dialogue of contextual theologies, with the author's Western background and exposure to the Asian context providing, with the insights of other theologians, the basis for a critical but friendly dialogue with the theological issues raised by the three theologians.

There are three main parts to the thesis. Part one consists of two chapters that provide introductions to Buddhism and Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Asia. The second and most substantial part of the thesis consists of three chapters, each devoted to one of the three theologians, examining how his thought has developed in dialogue with Buddhism. The final part has two chapters, the first consists of a critique of the theologians' dialogue with Buddhism and a critical engagement with the theological issues and challenges that emerge from the dialogue. This is followed by the conclusion, which relates the thesis findings to its stated aims and proposes areas of further study. Each part of the thesis has its own methodology. In the first part the method is largely descriptive and historical. This also plays a role in the second part where the predominant approach is thematic and interpretative. In the final part a critical and dialogical method is applied.

The thesis seeks to demonstrate that the three Asian theologians, through dialogue with Buddhism, contribute to the contextualisation of Christian theology in Asia and, moreover, raise important challenges to the worldwide theological community and church.

## Acknowledgements

It is possible to name only a few of the many people and organisations without whose help and encouragement this thesis would not have been completed.

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## List of Abbreviations

EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
<i>AJT</i>	<i>Asia Journal of Theology</i>
ATESEA	Association for Theological Education in South East Asia
BCRTCA	Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association
BIRA	Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs
<i>BNIRC</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture</i>
CAT	Congress of Asian Theologians
CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
CCTD	Catholic Council of Thailand for Development
CEP	Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples
CWF	Christian Workers Fellowship
<i>EAJT</i>	<i>East Asia Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Ecumenical Review</i>
<i>ERT</i>	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference
<i>IBMR</i>	<i>International Bulletin of Missionary Research</i>
INEB	International Network of Engaged Buddhists
<i>IRM</i>	<i>International Review of Mission(s)</i>
ISPCK	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>JBE</i>	<i>Journal of Buddhist Ethics</i>
<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
PCID	Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
PTCA	Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia
SEAGST	South East Asia Graduate School of Theology
<i>SEAJT</i>	<i>South East Asia Journal of Theology</i>
<i>VJTR</i>	<i>Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection</i>
WCC	World Council of Churches

## Preface

In this thesis a number of Buddhist terms are transliterated into English from Asian languages, most notably Pali and Sanskrit. The transliteration of terms follows established practice as seen, for example, in Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary: Manuel of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 4<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition, published in 1980. In the thesis, Buddhist terms are italicised, except in certain cases where they refer to proper nouns. To help the reader, a glossary of Buddhist terms is given at the end of the thesis. Unlike Nyanatiloka, however, I have decided not to use diacritics when transliterating except when quoting others who have used them. This is in agreement with the position adopted by the Asian theologian, Stanley Samartha, who at the beginning of his book *One Christ - Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*, published in 1991, stated that those familiar with Buddhist terms are in no need of diacritics to understand the terms better, and those who are unfamiliar are unlikely to be helped by their use. I do recognise, however, that orthography is a demanding and important work.

# Introduction

*I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu and I 'return' a Buddhist, without ceasing to be a Christian.<sup>1</sup>*

## Aim and Rationale of the Thesis

### The Intention

From earliest times both Christianity and Buddhism described themselves as Ways or Paths of salvation/liberation. In Christianity this can be seen in the Acts of the Apostles 9:2 and 19:23. In Buddhism there are more extensive references to Path (*magga*) or Way. For example: Buddhism is often referred to as the 'Middle Way' because it seeks to avoid the extremes of hedonism and excessive mortification in its practice; Theravada, one of the major Buddhist schools, translates as the 'Way/Doctrine of the Elders'; and a central teaching of Buddhism, described later, is called the 'Noble Eightfold Path.' In Asia, throughout history, these Ways have crossed through encounters between followers of the two religions. In the present Asian context they can be found intersecting in the work of Asian Christian theologians, as the quote from Raimundo Panikkar at the beginning of this chapter suggests. Out of this crossing a dialogue begins, and from this dialogue new developments in theology emerge.

At the centre of this study stands the work of three contemporary Asian theologians - Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris. The aim of the thesis is to engage critically with the theologies of these theologians as they have developed through dialogue with Buddhism. The thesis will describe the dialogue with Buddhism into which they have entered and interpret the impact it has had on their theological writings. It will offer a critique of their dialogue with Buddhism and, more importantly, enter into a critical discourse with the theological issues and challenges that emerge from it.

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<sup>1</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 2. Italics used by me for emphasis (unless otherwise stated explicitly, quotations throughout this thesis are reproduced in the original fashion used by the author). Panikkar comments here on his personal spiritual journey when he left Europe to live in Asia.



The focus of the thesis is Asian Christian theology rather than Buddhism or interreligious dialogue. The objective is not to produce a comparative study of the two religions, though knowledge of both is required and comparisons will be made; nor is it to concentrate simply on the theme of interreligious dialogue, though this is obviously a central aspect of the thesis. Instead, the intention is to describe the ways in which the theologies of Koyama, Song, and Pieris have been shaped by a dialogue with Buddhism, and to discern and discuss the theological insights and disputed points that arise from it. The originality of this thesis lies in studying the three theologians together as representatives of a continuum of Asian Christian theologians who have contextualised their theology in dialogue with Buddhism. From the bibliography it can be seen that there have been some individual studies of the three theologians, but none that has looked at them collectively and from the perspective of their dialogue with Buddhism.

## **A Study in Contextual Theology**

Missiologists like Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls note that there has been a shift in the gravity of Christianity, from the Northern to Southern continents. The majority of Christians no longer live in the West. Moreover, there is recognition that the most exciting and challenging theological developments are taking place in the South.<sup>2</sup> This is because Third World theologians are developing contextual theologies, where Christian faith is brought into dialogue with the diversity of social, political, economic, cultural and religious realities that determine the lives of people. In wrestling with such contextual realities theology becomes alive. It finds new meanings in the biblical witness and discovers new understandings of who and where God is. It also asks hard questions about the purpose and method of theologising itself. This thesis is an attempt to understand better the theological issues faced in the Asian context to which the three Asian theologians<sup>3</sup> relate and the challenges that emerge from it.

In 1972 the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches (WCC), under the direction and influence of the Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe, coined the term 'contextualisation.' This term went beyond the earlier concern for

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<sup>2</sup> Lamin Sanneh, "Theology of Mission," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 572; Andrew F. Walls, "In Quest of the Father of Mission Studies," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research (IBMR)* 23, no. 3 (1999): 98.

<sup>3</sup> Koyama, Song and Pieris are referred to collectively here, and later in later chapters, as the 'three Asian theologians' or as the 'three theologians.'



‘indigenisation,’ which encouraged theologians to engage with elements of traditional culture, by stressing the need for theology to relate to the changing social, economic and political realities of different local contexts in the world.<sup>4</sup> This thesis is a study of *Asian* contextual theology as explicated by the three theologians. It attempts to show how Asian contextual realities have a significant bearing on theological reflection in the continent. In the last few decades there has been a growing appreciation in theological circles that all theology is contextual in nature - in the sense that the human experience of life in the social context, with all its economic, religious, cultural and other influences, is an important source for theological reflection.<sup>5</sup> It is better understood today that theology has been conditioned by contextual realities throughout Christian history, often unconsciously so. Biblical scholars, for example, have for many years sought to understand the meaning of texts in relation to their ‘situation’ or ‘Sitz im Leben.’<sup>6</sup> Studies of early church theologians have also evinced how the practical concerns of their age and the influence of their cultures in which they grew up shaped their theologising.<sup>7</sup> In modern times, liberation theologies from Latin America and elsewhere have highlighted the need for theology to confront the unjust contextual realities in which people find themselves living, especially conditions of poverty and oppression. The three Asian theologians of this thesis are also aware that they must engage with the contextual realities that face them. It is no longer possible, they and other Asian theologians hold, to believe that a theology produced in the West and exported through missionary endeavour, as in the past, is appropriate or adequate for the Asian context. This thesis, recognising the significance of contextualisation, explores how the three theologians have gone about developing an Asian theology directly related to their context through dialogue with Buddhism.

To say ‘Asian theology’ immediately invites correction. Asia is such a vast and diverse continent in terms of geography, ethnicity, language, economics, politics,

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Lienemann-Perrin, *Training for a Relevant Ministry: A Study of the Work of the Theological Education Fund* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1981), 174-176. For the influence of Shoki Coe see, William P. Russell, “Contextualization: Origins, Meaning and Implications: A Study of what the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches Originally Understood by the Term ‘Contextualization’, with Special Reference to the Period 1970-1972” (PhD Thesis, Pontificia Universitate Gregoriana, 1995), 361-437.

<sup>5</sup> Bevans provides a good outline of how the contextual nature of theology has come to be appreciated in recent decades based on new theological understandings within Christianity and external pressures from without. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 5-10.

<sup>6</sup> Martin J. Buss, “The Idea of Sitz im Leben - History and Critique,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978): 157-170.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the study of Tertullian, Origen and Irenaeus by Justo L. González, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).

culture, and religion that to try to understand what constitutes its 'Asianness' seems like an impossible task beyond pointing to continental demarcation lines on a map. Asian theologians, however, while acknowledging plurality, have also found that they share common concerns. For instance, they often refer to the fact that across Asia Christianity is a minority religion, and they speak of a common history of colonialism experienced and suffered by most Asian countries. Moreover, they also point to common theological concerns that cross geographical and other boundaries. These have been clearly marked out, for example, in the meetings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and their associated theological committees since the early 1970s. The Roman Catholic bishops delineate three contextual realities that shape the shared theological concerns of Asian Christians: many cultures, many religions, and poverty.<sup>8</sup> Facing such common realities, which are also reflected upon in the work of Protestant theologians, enables Asian theologians to speak of developing an Asian theology; though they are aware that this is made up of many theologies from specific contexts. This is the sense in which the term 'Asian theology' is used in this thesis. In particular, it is the multireligious aspect of the Asian continent, the 'many religions' factor, that distinguishes Asian theological concerns from other Third World and Western theologies. This thesis recognises the significance of the plurality of religions encountered by Asian theology, and the interreligious issues it raises, by focusing on the dialogue with Buddhism within the work of the three theologians.

Different contexts bring their own questions and priorities that present challenges to the worldwide theological community and church.<sup>9</sup> The way liberation theology, for example, has highlighted the suffering of the poor in Latin America has had great effect on Western theologians and churches, where the injustice of poverty and the West's complicity in it has become an important theological concern.<sup>10</sup> The Asian context shares with Latin America the experience of unjust poverty. However, in contrast to Latin America, Christians in Asia number a small minority of the continent's population.<sup>11</sup> Only in the Philippines does the church command the

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<sup>8</sup> Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact," in *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Quenzon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1992), xxv.

<sup>9</sup> The word 'church' is used generically in this thesis to refer to Christian churches of all denominations. Individual denominations will be specified when referring to them.

<sup>10</sup> See the assessment of liberation theology by Christopher Rowland, "Epilogue: the Future of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 248-251.

<sup>11</sup> A figure of 7% is given by Peter Brierley and Heather Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity* (London: Christian Research; New Alresford: Hunt & Thorpe, 1998), 12. The distribution of

allegiance of the majority. Not only is the church small but in most Asian lands it is looked upon as being the representative of a foreign religion because of its associations with the West. This is in part a historical problem, with the church being linked to the expansion of Western colonialism and the injustices colonial powers perpetrated against indigenous Asian peoples. But it is also a contemporary problem, with Western influences evident in the Asian Christian's "style of life, ways of worship, organisation, dependence on foreign funds, extensive foreign contacts, and training abroad."<sup>12</sup> The way to overcome this reality and the unfavourable perception of Christianity it gives to Asian people is, according to many Asian theologians, for the church to be rooted in the grassroots concerns and struggles of people in Asia. This thesis describes how the three theologians have sought to immerse themselves in the concerns of Asian peoples through their dialogue with Buddhism, a religion that stands at the heart of Asian civilisation. Through their work the three theologians argue that the minority status of the Christian community can be a starting point for rich theological reflection, which seeks to grapple with some of the thorniest and most challenging areas of theology today such as religious pluralism and socio-economic liberation. Their dialogue with Buddhism, it will be shown, relates to the wider social concerns of ordinary Asian peoples, not simply or even primarily to issues of religious belief and doctrine.

### **To Promote a Dialogue of Theologies**

An important reason for studying the work of the three theologians, as it has developed in dialogue with Buddhism, is to contribute to current debates in the wider theological community. Theology done in a consciously contextual way has the benefit of rooting faith in concrete human concerns. There are limitations though. Contexts may have unique features, which means that theological insights taken from them could lack universal significance. For example, the theological issues that arise in seeking to understand the social, cultural and religious context in Glasgow obviously differ in many ways from those in Bangkok or Colombo. On the other hand, human contexts are never completely unrelated. Indeed, the poverty found in parts of Glasgow may be connected to that which is found in a Bangkok slum,<sup>13</sup> and

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Christians across the continent is uneven. For example, in Korea the figure is above 30% whereas in Thailand and Japan it is less than 1%.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Amaladoss, "Liberation as an Inter-religious Project," in *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 169.

<sup>13</sup> Poverty and inequality have been growing in rich countries in recent years. This growth, it is argued, is linked to the modern capitalist system that also creates poverty in the Third World. See Bob

there are Buddhists in Glasgow as there are Christians in Colombo. Tissa Balasuriya and Daniel Adams, therefore, speak of the need for a dialogue of contextual theologies which contributes towards a “planetary theology” or a “global theology.”<sup>14</sup> This is not an attempt to create a universal theology in the fashion that Western theology operated in the past. Rather, it stems from recognition that theologies from different contexts produce specific insights which, when brought into dialogue with each other, can be part of a process of mutual critique and enhancement of general theological debate across contextual boundaries. It can be expected then, for instance, that Asian Christians, because of their long history of exposure to world religions, will be able to contribute to a theological understanding of religions in ways that the West has not been able to do and which may help Western Christians to understand better people of other religions in their midst. Global theology is seen here as a constantly evolving process that seeks to relate to ever changing contextual realities. In this process the worth of contextual theologies is found in what Robert Schreiter calls their “universalising function,” that is, their ability to speak beyond their contexts in dialogue with other theologies.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, a dialogue of theologies is necessary today because people are increasingly moving between contexts and being affected by different cultural forces simultaneously to an extent that was not possible in the past. Factors such as international travel and globalisation have brought this about. This thesis seeks to contribute towards the process of a wider dialogue of theologies, as a study of Asian theology from within a Western academic setting and by someone from the West.

Given the ways in which Western theological thought has dominated the church on all continents, it is perhaps more incumbent on Western theologians than others to listen and learn from theologies from other parts of the world. This thesis is, therefore, conceived as part of a process of listening to Asian Christians and learning from them. However, it seeks to engage with the theological issues and challenges which comes out of the work of the three theologians in the spirit of a friendly but critical dialogue. It is hoped, then, that this thesis will play a part, in its own small way, towards the never-ending project of developing a planetary theology.

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Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care*, trans. and ed. Mark R. Vander Vennen. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub.; Geneva: World Council of Churches [WCC] Publications, 1995), 3-4, 59-64.

<sup>14</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 16; Daniel J. Adams, *Cross-Cultural Theology: Western Reflections in Asia* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 109.

<sup>15</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, “The Changing Contexts of Intercultural Theology: A Global View,” *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 362.



## The Choice of the Three Theologians and Buddhism

The three theologians chosen for this study have been selected for a number of reasons. Most importantly, over many years they have all engaged in a significant dialogue with Buddhism that has influenced their theologies. In addition to this, they have each been brought up in an Asian culture that has been influenced by Buddhist traditions, and so their exposure to Buddhism is deeply rooted. Another attractive feature of their dialogue is that it has not been restricted to purely 'religious' topics, but has sought to relate to the wider contextual concerns of Asian theology. However, the theologians have also been chosen because they differ in some respects. They come from different church denominations, though all are ecumenically minded, and from different countries. Their dialogue has been carried out in differing ways and with different Buddhist traditions, so they present a variety of theological approaches and use a wide-ranging amount of Buddhist sources in their work. Thus the thesis covers a certain breadth of Buddhist thought, theological methods, and contextual experiences to be found in the theological discourses of the three theologians.

The Christian dialogue with Buddhism is only one component of a wider Christian dialogue with the religions in Asia.<sup>16</sup> The choice of focussing on the dialogue with Buddhism is made for a few important reasons. As Chapter Two will explain, Buddhism is a religion that has spread across the divergent cultural and social parameters of the Asian continent and has come to exert a profound influence on Asian societies. Due to its geographical spread across Asia and its ability to adapt and adopt local customs and ways of thinking, the dialogue with Buddhism deserves to be studied, for in some ways it is the most Asian of religions. Another reason for choosing Buddhism is personal in nature: this writer has been exposed to Buddhism and has a certain knowledge of the religion, as explained in more detail at the end of this introduction.

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<sup>16</sup> In Asia, for example, the dialogue between Christians and Hindus has been going on for many years. For an overview of Indian theology see George Gispert-Sauch, "Asian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Second Edition, 1997), 458-466. With regard to the extensive dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Asia see the various articles in J. Paul Rajashekar and H. S. Wilson, eds., *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*, Report of a Consultation sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1992).

# Structure and Methodology

## An Introduction to the Chapters

The thesis is divided into three parts, each with its own methodological emphases. Part I, *Buddhism and Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: The Asian Experience*, consists of two chapters. The aim is to provide brief introductions to Buddhism and to Christian-Buddhist dialogue on the Asian continent. This will provide the reader with a greater understanding of the background within which the dialogue with Buddhism in the work of the three theologians operates. The general methodological approach is descriptive and historical in providing information about Buddhism and the development of dialogue.

Though in recent years Buddhism has made a small number of converts and caught the interest of many people in the West, it remains a largely Asian religion.<sup>17</sup> The introduction to the religion in its Asian context in Chapter 1, *Asian Buddhism*, is divided into three sections. These sections are based on the structure of Buddhism's 'Three Jewels' (*ti-ratana*) - the Buddha, *Dhamma* (Teaching), and *Sangha* (Order of Disciples) - familiar to all branches of Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> The first section provides an account of the Buddha's life and the expansion of the Buddhist religion; the second section gives an outline of basic Buddhist teachings; and the final section describes the Buddhist community and Buddhism in the modern world.

Chapter 2, *Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Asia*, focuses on Asian Christian involvement in the dialogue with Buddhism. This chapter provides a brief overview of the history of Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Asia, before moving on to give an account of present day dialogue to be found in published literature. To provide a better description of contemporary dialogue, use is made of a model that classifies dialogue into four forms. This model, to which modifications have been made, was developed by the 'Secretariat for Non-Christians' and later by the 'Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue,' both Vatican bodies. To conclude Part I of the thesis, a

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<sup>17</sup> The number given of Buddhists worldwide varies. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Online* gives a figure of over 350 million (56% Mahayana, 38% Theravada, and 6% Tantric) in 1998: available from [http://search.eb.com/bol/topic?teu=l&tbl\\_id=136729](http://search.eb.com/bol/topic?teu=l&tbl_id=136729); Internet; accessed 3 November 1999. A figure of 253 million is given by Brierley and Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity*, 55. An information page of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC World Service) gives 500 million: available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/religion/buddhism/>; Internet; accessed 3 November 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Given the diversity of views in Buddhism it is difficult to find a common starting point to describe the religion. Some scholars would take issue with the universal applicability of the 'Three Jewels.' For example, see Masao Abe, "Buddhism," in *Our Religions*, ed. Arvind Shamra (San Francisco: Harper, 1993; Paperback Edition, 1995), 73-74. However, many scholars refer to the 'Three Jewels' as the most common and binding aspect of Buddhism.

brief introduction is given to the Buddhist context and general climate of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in each of the countries that the three Asian theologians are associated with.

Part II, *The Theologies of Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris in Dialogue with Buddhism*, takes up most of the thesis and has three chapters. Each chapter is an individual study of the work of one of the theologians and his dialogue with Buddhism. In the introduction to each chapter there is a brief description of the theologian's work, followed by an account of the factors that have motivated him in his dialogue with Buddhism and the ways in which dialogue has been pursued. The main part of the chapter follows, where the theologian's work is divided into major themes. After an outline of each theological theme, as it is found generally in his work, a detailed explanation of how the theme has been developed in dialogue with Buddhism is given. The themes have not been imposed on the work of the theologians but arise from the areas of dialogue with Buddhism in which the theologians have been engaged. The methodology in these chapters is descriptive and interpretative. It is principally thematic in outline but historical developments in each theologian's work are explained.

Part III of the thesis, *The Three Asian Theologians: An Assessment*, consists of two chapters. The general methodological approach applied is critical and dialogical (see 'A Personal Preamble' below). Chapter 6, *The Dialogue with Buddhism and Emerging Theological Issues and Challenges: A Critical Engagement*, has two main sections, 6.2 and 6.3. Section 6.2 is a critical and comparative assessment of the theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. The theological framework of each theologian within which the dialogue with Buddhism has progressed is described, the significance of the dialogue for his theology noted, and a critique of shortcomings that appear within his dialogue given. The critique will highlight inconsistencies and shortcomings in their dialogue in relation to their theological concerns.<sup>19</sup> This section ends with a brief comparative assessment of the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism.

The major part of the chapter, section 6.3, focuses on a critical engagement with the theological issues and challenges that have emerged from the theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. The researcher's own categories are imposed here for assessing their theologies, and reference is also made to the work of other Asian and

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<sup>19</sup> There are not many Buddhists who have commented on the work of the three theologians in a critical manner, so the critique draws upon general works on Buddhism and the researcher's personal experience.

Western theologians. The principal aim is not to provide a comparative assessment of the three theologians' work in this section, though comparisons are made, but to enter into a critical dialogue where the theological challenges that arise from their work are explored and shortcomings and controversial issues debated. Three main areas of theological concern are highlighted - The Interreligious Aspect of Asian Christian Identity, Theology in the Asian Context, and Asian Liberation Theology - within which various theological issues are debated. Chapter 7, *Conclusion*, relates the findings of the thesis to the aim stated in this *Introduction* and points out some important areas where further research and development are required.

## Limitations

There are some methodological limitations to this study. Firstly, the thesis is limited to a study of the published English writings of the three theologians. Since English is the main medium they use for their theological writings this does not present too great a limitation. The researcher appreciates, however, the need felt by Asian theologians for the development of theologies in their various vernacular languages and recognises that trying to convey Buddhist thought in English can be troublesome. The three theologians have not been interviewed, though they were informed of the thesis and Pieris did provide a few comments on his work in a personal letter. There have been various reasons for not visiting and interviewing. One of the theologians remarked that he was very busy and would not have the time to respond to my written arguments. Also, the researcher's own family circumstances have meant that there was neither the time nor money to travel abroad. Moreover, the theologians have all published their work in the public domain and it is therefore reasonable to suggest that a critical study of this thesis' nature can be done without misrepresenting their thought.

Secondly, the three theologians are all men. It would have been preferable to include a woman or women in this study. Women are engaged in dialogue at all levels in Asia but this dialogue goes largely unreported and women are often missing from written reports on dialogue between the two religions.<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that patriarchal structures of power and influence within both Christian and Buddhist

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<sup>20</sup> The researcher became personally aware of the significance of grassroots dialogue initiated by women during work in Thailand. There he observed meetings between Catholic nuns and Buddhist women which took place regularly, and where there was discussion on doctrinal, social and gender issues. This, however, went unreported to the wider theological community. At the village level in Thailand, Christian women initiated dialogue with Buddhist neighbours on a variety of community matters.



religions connive to deny women a voice in interreligious dialogue. Ursula King remarks that women are ignored and feared by men in interreligious dialogue. If women were to play a full role in dialogue, she argues, this would bring political and theological transformations to the discussions.<sup>21</sup> Asian women theologians recognise the need for more involvement in interreligious dialogue. Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Park wrote that women “must actively participate in the interfaith dialogue to give feminist input, sorting out what are the really liberating elements and what are the oppressive elements in them.”<sup>22</sup> There are some Asian Christian women theologians who refer to dialogue with Buddhism but they have not written extensively on the subject. There does not exist, therefore, enough published material by an Asian woman theologian to be considered as a major subject for study in the area of this thesis. The Asian feminist critique of male domination in religious traditions and theological circles does, this researcher recognises, point to a serious weakness and injustice that is found in Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Asia.

Lastly, the thesis does not attempt to be an exhaustive treatment of the theologians’ entire work. It is limited to theological issues related to their dialogue with Buddhism.

## **A Personal Preamble**

Post-modern criticism has shown how it is impossible for a scholar to remain completely objective and detached in her or his work.<sup>23</sup> The past experience and outlook of the scholar colours the approach towards the organising and understanding of materials. With this in mind, some personal information about the researcher is provided here for the reader to understand better his interest and general methodological approach in this thesis.

For some years I lived with a Japanese Buddhist order, Nipponzan Myohoji, in which I was ordained as a Buddhist monk for a short time. During this period I was greatly involved in interreligious dialogue, especially in religious peace and justice

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<sup>21</sup> Ursula King, “Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions,” in *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed. John D’Arcy May (London: Cassell, 1998), 40-55.

<sup>22</sup> Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Park, “Emerging Spirituality of Asian Women,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology. Reflections from the Women’s Communion of the Ecumenical Association of Third World theologians*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyaye (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 86.

<sup>23</sup> James L. Cox, “Alterity as Identity: Innovation in the Academic Study of Religions,” *British Association for the Study of Religions Occasional Papers*, BASR Annual Conference, Lampeter, 1998: 1-2.

movements. For over four years I also worked in Thailand as a church pastor, living in a small rural community and serving poor village churches where Christian-Buddhist dialogue was a fact of everyday life. Dialogue with villagers ranged over areas as diverse as interreligious marriage, caring for AIDS victims, and finding sustainable livelihoods for debt-ridden farmers. I was also involved in a more formal monthly meeting to discuss religious and social matters with a local Buddhist monk. Experiences such as these have taught me that dialogue is an essential and necessary part of Christian life in Asia, and that dialogue with Buddhism can be a theologically enriching and challenging exercise. This thesis, then, is in part an outcome of my own desire to explore more deeply the theological significance of dialogue with Buddhism, believing that it can contribute insights to the development of both Asian theology and theology globally. Moreover, I find myself in agreement with many Asian theologians who stress that interreligious dialogue must take the form of service to the world community and environment, especially the poor and oppressed.

Despite having lived in Asia, I am not Asian. My upbringing and schooling in theology has been in the West. However, having had a foot in Asian Buddhism and Asian church life provides me, I believe, with a sympathetic and critical eye through which to review the work of the three theologians. In general I follow a broad methodological approach outlined by Raimundo Panikkar some years ago. He argued on a number of philosophical and practical levels against the application of *epoché* in interreligious dialogue, favoured in the field of Religious Studies, where researchers bracket out their beliefs and feelings so that they do not affect their judgements of the religious 'other.' Instead of this, Panikkar suggested that there must be an honest and open dialogue between that which the person holds dear in their own faith and the beliefs and practices of the other's religion. This results in an "*intrareligious* dialogue, . . . an inner dialogue within myself, an encounter in the depth of my personal religiousness, having met another religious experience on that very intimate level."<sup>24</sup> This approach enables a methodology based on a critical dialogue to develop, where there is a genuine respect for the beliefs and ways of the 'other' which are brought into a critical dialogue with one's own convictions. Personally speaking, in this thesis the 'other' are the Asian theologians and to a lesser extent Buddhism. I find myself engaging naturally with the work of the theologians, where I seek to bring the issues that arise from their encounter with Buddhism into dialogue with my own Christian faith, which itself continues to be influenced by Buddhism in various ways.

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<sup>24</sup> Panikkar, *Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 40.

**Part I**

**Buddhism  
and Christian-Buddhist Dialogue:  
The Asian Experience**

# Chapter 1

## Asian Buddhism

### 1.1 The Buddha and the Spread of Buddhism

#### 1.1.1 Life of the Buddha

The 'Three Jewels' of Buddhism - Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Sangha* - stand at the centre of a basic confessional formula in which Buddhists place their trust and take refuge.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, the Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Buddha, meaning 'enlightened or awakened one,' is a title that was given to a man called Siddhartha Gautama, often called Sakyamuni (the sage of the Sakya clan), born some time between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>2</sup> Only scant biographical details about the Buddha's life can be found in the oldest scriptures. It was not until several centuries after his death that hagiographic biographies began to appear. He was, according to tradition, born into a ruling aristocratic family in a small republic in what is now southern Nepal. Many miraculous events are said to have surrounded the story of his birth, for example, that he was conceived without intercourse and that he descended from a heaven directly into his mother's womb in the form of a sacred white elephant. His father, fearful that his son was destined to become a spiritual leader and renounce the future rule of the region, went about pampering Siddhartha with a luxurious lifestyle in order to keep him attached to worldly pleasures and free from suffering. However, after being confronted by sights of human suffering in the forms of old age, sickness, and death, the Buddha-to-be decided to forsake his sheltered existence, and wife and recently born child, to follow an ascetic life. His decision was inspired by another sight, this time not of human suffering but of a holy

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<sup>1</sup> They are also called the 'Triple Gem' or 'Three Refuges.' For an English translation of the Theravada liturgy for 'taking refuge in the Triple Gem' see Susan Walker, ed., *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 73-74.

<sup>2</sup> There is disagreement over the dates of the Buddha's life. The Theravada tradition dates him from 624-544 BCE. Some scholars prefer 566-486 BCE or 563-483 BCE, while Japanese Buddhists date him 448-368 BCE. Roy C. Amore and Julia Ching, "The Buddhist Tradition," in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996), 221.

man sitting in meditation. This encounter convinced him of the need to renounce family ties and to set out on the religious quest to conquer suffering and death.

The area where Sakyamuni wandered seems to have witnessed much religious ferment.<sup>3</sup> There was an established practice of people leaving home and society in order to seek religious meaning through a mendicant and semi-monastic life, perhaps attached to some teacher, following various ascetic and meditation practices. Historical details are sketchy but there may have been tensions in society caused by the rise of merchant classes and social inequality, and also religious tensions between Brahmins and people of indigenous religions.<sup>4</sup> For six years Sakyamuni subjected himself to rigorous ascetic practices and sought the teaching of the most gifted gurus, but all left him feeling unsatisfied. Eventually he forsook extreme asceticism just as he had earlier forsaken the life of luxury. Sitting under a large fig tree he resolved to attain enlightenment, drawing inspiration from the recollection of a meditation experience that had spontaneously arisen during his childhood. He was assailed by all sorts of demons and temptations but in the end came to experience a definitive and all-encompassing enlightenment or *nirvana*. This enabled him to understand the nature of reality, and the cause of suffering and how to overcome it. For the next forty-five years of his life, Sakyamuni Buddha sought to lead others to enlightenment. He died at the age of eighty, by which time the Buddhist religion had become well established.

### 1.1.2 The Expansion of Buddhism

From its beginnings Buddhism was a missionary religion, which sprang from the compassion that the Buddha felt for suffering humanity. After gathering his first sixty disciples the Buddha sent them out into the world in pairs to preach his teachings of liberation for the benefit of humankind. Due to the commitment to mission of many monks and nuns, and the message they carried, Buddhism grew to become one of Asia's most widespread and influential religious traditions. The patronage of wealthy and powerful rulers was also crucial to its missionary success. The most important of these was Emperor Asoka, who ruled much of modern India in the third century BCE. Buddhist tradition claims that a Buddhist monk converted him from being a ruthless and bloody conqueror, inspiring him to rule his kingdom

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the Buddha's life and ministry took place in the modern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>4</sup> An overview of the social and religious situation of the time is given in Amore and Ching, "The Buddhist Tradition," 217-220.

by largely non-violent means with respect for people's various religious beliefs, though with a concern to spread Buddhist teachings.<sup>5</sup> Under his patronage Buddhism flowered and he is said to have sent Buddhist missionaries to many lands including Burma and Sri Lanka.

Various Buddhist schools, traditionally numbering eighteen, already existed during Asoka's reign. All of these died out except for the Theravada ('Doctrine/Way of the Elders') tradition, which continues today. Over a period of several centuries the Theravada came to dominate the religious life of many countries in Southeast Asia. Today it is the major tradition in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos. Theravada Buddhism claims to have kept faithfully to the original teachings of the historical Buddha. It was the first school to compile a Buddhist canon, called the *Ti-pitaka* ('Three Baskets'), consisting of the Buddha's and his disciples' discourses (*Sutta Pitaka*), the monastic rule (*Vinaya Pitaka*), and philosophical treatises by early monks (*Abhidhamma Pitaka*). The canon was written in the Pali script, possibly a lost North Indian dialect, which remains the sacred script common to all Theravada countries. However, Buddhism largely died out in India. Internal squabbling may have contributed to its demise but monasteries, the lifeblood of Buddhism, were easy targets for invading Muslim forces. Hinduism also began to appropriate and absorb Buddhist teachings, and Indian rulers tended to favour the Hindu religion when threatened by invasion.<sup>6</sup> In other countries Buddhism was also gradually replaced, often by the spread of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Another form of Buddhism, traceable to the first century BCE, spread to many parts of northern and eastern Asia. It called itself the Mahayana ('Great Vehicle') tradition because of its stress on salvation being open to all, both lay and ordained. Most likely, it began as a movement of new ideas and scriptures in Indian Buddhism that took many years to develop and define its identity.<sup>8</sup> Mahayana Buddhists contrasted themselves with what they saw as the conservative and elitist spirituality of the Theravada, which they pejoratively called Hinayana (the 'Little Vehicle'). Despite differences, lay and monastic communities from both traditions continued to

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<sup>5</sup> Stone edicts erected by Asoka, which promote social harmony and religious values, still stand in India. For a translation of these see Nipponzan Myohoji, *Ashoka: Translation of the Edicts of Ashoka* (Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India: Nipponzan Myohoji, 1984). For an introduction to Asoka and the missions he sponsored see Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 127-136.

<sup>6</sup> By the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE the Buddha was considered an incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. Some Hindu philosophers, like Sankara (788-820 CE), were hostile towards Buddhism. There was, though, still a sizeable Theravada community in South India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>7</sup> This happened in Central Asian lands, modern day Pakistan, Malaysia and parts of Indonesia.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-33.



live and practise together for centuries. Mahayana itself developed into many schools as it spread from India to Central Asia and into China around the first century CE. From China it spread to Vietnam and Korea and then on to Japan. Another Buddhist tradition, considered by some of its adherents as the culmination of Theravada and Mahayana, though perhaps best understood as a development within the Mahayana, is that of Tantric Buddhism or Vajrayana ('Diamond/Adamantine Vehicle'), which arose in India around the third century CE.<sup>9</sup> Tantric Buddhism emphasises esoteric teachings and practices, and had a far-ranging influence across the Buddhist world, as can be seen in the mandala-inspired construction of the ancient Borobudur Temple in Java. Its influence died out in many countries but it continues to be the Buddhism of Tibetan people and is found in Bhutan, Nepal, and Mongolia.

Over a period of many centuries, then, Buddhism spread across the Asian continent. In doing so it brought immense influence to bear on the cultures, philosophies, arts, politics and religious outlook of Asian peoples. It has shown a remarkable ability not only to cross geographical but also linguistic, cultural, racial, and philosophical barriers. This is seen most clearly in Buddhism's spread to China in the face of an already sophisticated religious culture based on Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism adapted itself to the prevailing culture that placed stress on familial and ancestral relationships, and adopted Taoist terms to express its own metaphysical teachings. Buddhist monks also embarked on one of the most ambitious translation programmes of all time. Masses of Buddhist texts, written in Indian and Central Asian languages, were translated into Chinese over a period of a thousand years. At the same time as it became Chinese in character, Buddhism "de-centred" Chinese thought and culture, opening it to influences from abroad.<sup>10</sup> Buddhism also came to exert a profound influence on the development of Neo-Confucian thought during the Sung dynasty (960-1269). Throughout its long history Buddhism has met with both failure and success. In India, its homeland, it almost disappeared and in China it failed to recover from a great persecution in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast, in other countries, especially in Southeast Asia and Tibet, Buddhism became inextricably intertwined with the political and cultural identity of

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<sup>9</sup> Tantra literally means 'continuum.' Most commentators categorise Tantric Buddhism as a form of Mahayana. Mahayana Buddhism is then referred to as Northern Buddhism. Some, however, argue that Tantric Buddhism stands in a category of its own and call it Northern Buddhism, with Mahayana referred to as Eastern Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup> Whalen Lai, "The Three Jewels in China," in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori et al. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1993; London: SCM Press, 1994), 280.

the people. It remains a significant Asian religion, an essential aspect of the continent's social and spiritual life.

## 1.2 The Teachings of Buddhism

### 1.2.1 Basic Buddhist Teachings

The second of the 'Three Jewels' is the *Dhamma*. The word *Dhamma* (Sanskrit: *Dharma*) refers to the pre-existent truth about the nature of reality, suffering, and the way to overcome suffering that the Buddha discovered through his spiritual quest and experience of enlightenment. The teaching of the Buddha encapsulates this truth and is, therefore, also referred to as the *Dhamma*.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of teaching *Dhamma* by the Buddha was to lead other beings to *nirvana*, the goal of the religious path. *Nirvana* is considered an ineffable and non-personal reality beyond human conception, the nature of which the Buddha refused to speculate upon. It is, in contrast to all other phenomena, an unconditioned state that is described in both negative and positive terms - as extinction of desire and individual existence, as release from suffering, and as experience of freedom and bliss. *Nirvana* is also classically defined in Buddhist texts as the extinction of *lobha/raga* (lust, greed), *dosa* (anger, hatred) and *moha* (delusion)<sup>12</sup> - the cleansing of the mind through moral and mental discipline.

The Buddha's first sermon after enlightenment contained the 'Four Noble Truths' (*ariya-sacca*), which are considered a foundational teaching and thought by many to incorporate the essence of Buddhist doctrine. The Buddha began by describing the human condition as characterised by *dukkha* or suffering (first truth). This *dukkha* is caused by *tanha* or craving (second truth),<sup>13</sup> which can be overcome (third truth) by following the Noble Eightfold Path (fourth truth). The Eightfold Path (*atthangika-magga*) is traditionally split into three interrelated sections: morality (right speech, right action, right livelihood), which forms the basis of the religious

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<sup>11</sup> In Buddhist texts the word *Dhamma* has various other meanings such as 'quality', 'nature of a thing', 'phenomenon', 'doctrine', etc. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), 55-56.

<sup>12</sup> The etymology of the word *nirvana* in Sanskrit, *nibbana* in Pali, is something like 'extinction' or 'blowing out.' For a study of its meaning see Junjirō Takakusu, "Buddhism as a Philosophy of 'Thusness,'" in *The Indian Mind: Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West Centre Press, University of Hawaii, 1967), 109.

<sup>13</sup> This includes the desire for existence and the desire for non-existence, as well as craving based on sensual and selfish desires.



life; mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), which brings about tranquillity and clarity of mind, especially in meditation practice; and wisdom (right view, right thought), to which morality and mental discipline give rise, enabling the Buddhist to understand the reality of the world and overcome suffering.<sup>14</sup> All phenomena, including the human person, are understood to arise from a series of dependent causes which themselves form the bases for further phenomena to arise. This is expressed in the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) where phenomena are analysed in a series of twelve linked causes: ignorance leading to volitional actions; then to consciousness; mental and physical phenomena; the senses; contact; feeling; craving; attachment; birth; old age; and death, whereupon the cycle repeats itself.<sup>15</sup> With this doctrine Buddhism supported the general Indic view that humans are caught in *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. More positively, the doctrine also stresses the interconnected and interdependent nature of the universe and human relationships.

Buddhism also places great stress on the law of *karma* (action) as determining the kind of spiritual progress and type of rebirth that a person can achieve. However, the Buddha rejected the Hindu notion that caste or ritual function was central to an individual's *karma*. Rather, he taught that the intention behind the act determined the fruit of *karma*. With this the Buddha undermined the validity and social segregation of the caste system, claiming that the will or intention of a person was what determined social differences. Another central concept in Buddhism is that of the 'three marks of existence' (*ti-lakkhana*) consisting of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. *Anicca* refers to impermanence. All phenomena, including human life and thought, were shown to be subject to change and decay - highlighted for Buddhism in the practice of meditation where the ever-changing thought processes of the human mind are recognised and analysed. The pervasiveness of *dukkha* is not taken to mean that all life is inherently evil and thus subject to suffering. It infers, rather, that existence is liable to experience suffering because of the impermanent nature of reality and the fact that people cling and attach value to this reality as if it were permanent, which gives rise to an unsatisfactory feeling (*dukkha*). *Anatta* is the doctrine of 'no-soul.' The Buddha rejected theism and the concept of an independently existing 'soul' or 'self.' When the human person was analysed, the Buddha claimed, there was only a series of ever changing psychological and material phenomena that in no way could be described as a self-existing entity constituting a 'soul.' However, if in Buddhism

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<sup>14</sup> For more detail of the *atthangika-magga* see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974), 45-50.

<sup>15</sup> Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, 150-159.

the soul is denied in somewhat ontological terms, the existence of a conditioned 'self' was accepted - as seen in the Buddha's last words to his disciples when he encouraged them to seek liberation through self-effort.

### 1.2.2 Developments in Buddhist Thought

The basic beliefs described above are held by the Theravada tradition. While accepting these, Mahayana Buddhism developed more doctrines and encouraged new forms of popular devotion. The Mahayana tradition also developed its own much larger canon of scripture than the Theravada. This, for the most part, was originally written in Sanskrit but many scriptures exist now only in Chinese or Tibetan translation. Mahayana Buddhism was critical of the Theravada version of the saintly person, the *arahant* ('worthy one'), who was seen as selfish in concentrating primarily on individual spiritual progress and self-perfection. It replaced him with the ideal of the compassionate *bodhisattva* ('enlightenment being'); one who takes a vow to become a buddha and to save all beings from suffering.<sup>16</sup> If the mark of the *arahant* was that of penetrating wisdom into the nature of reality, then that of the *bodhisattva* was an overflowing compassion for sentient existence caught in suffering (though penetrating wisdom is the guiding principle of the *bodhisattva's* compassionate nature). The Theravada tradition was also criticised for limiting liberation to ordained members of the Buddhist community.<sup>17</sup> The Mahayana asserted that *nirvana*, though difficult to achieve, was essentially open to all people. This was supported by their emphasis on a belief that all people and creatures contained buddhahood, the capability of becoming a buddha, which the *bodhisattva* way sought to realise.

In the metaphysical sphere, the Mahayana developed the concept of *anatta* by stressing that spiritual wisdom came through an awareness of *sunyata* or the 'emptiness' of all things in the universe.<sup>18</sup> The doctrine of *sunyata* was developed into a sophisticated metaphysic of the 'Middle Way' by the Indian monk Nagarjuna (c. 200 CE), who refused to negate or affirm any statement about reality since all fell short of the ultimate truth. It is also a central doctrine of many Mahayana scriptures,

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<sup>16</sup> The Theravada tradition recognised that the Buddha had been a *bodhisattva* before becoming enlightened; however it restricted the title to use with Sakyamuni alone. The *arahant* was one who came to enlightenment through following the teachings and religious path explained by a Buddha.

<sup>17</sup> While it is not seen as impossible for lay people to attain enlightenment, the Theravada tradition emphasises that monastic discipline is the most conducive form of religious life for spiritual progress.

<sup>18</sup> For a description of *sunyata* in Mahayana Buddhism see Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 29-32.

particularly the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* ('Perfection of Wisdom' Texts). It is stressed, however, that *sunyata* is not primarily a philosophy but represents an intuitive insight into the emptiness of all reality. Eventually *sunyata* became identified with *nirvana*, and was further seen to be identical with *samsara*, in the sense that each was present in the other. What had been a clear distinction between *nirvana* and *samsara* in early Buddhism developed into a metaphysical correspondence in the thought of Mahayana Buddhism. This paved the way for a positive assessment of involvement and realisation of *nirvana* in the world rather than in disengagement from it.

Mahayana also developed the *Trikaya* or 'Three Bodies' doctrine of the Buddha to explain the transcendental significance of a buddha and means of communication with such an enlightened one. The historical appearance of a buddha, like Sakyamuni, was considered to be the 'Transformation Body' (*Nirmanakaya*). A buddha's 'Bliss Body' (*Sambhogakaya*) was a heavenly body existing in the celestial sphere and with which the *bodhisattvas* could commune. The 'Truth Body' (*Dharmakaya*) represented Buddha as the eternal truth (*Dhamma/Dharma*) and essence of the universe beyond human conception. It is also conceived as being the source of all buddhas, of *Dhamma*, and of the potential within sentient beings to become a buddha.<sup>19</sup> Another difference from Theravada tradition was the Mahayana's belief in a great number of buddhas. The Theravada held that Sakyamuni was only one of many buddhas who had been born in previous ages, and they looked forward to the birth of Metteyya, the buddha of the future to be born when Sakyamuni's teaching has disappeared from the world. However, the birth of a buddha was considered to be an extremely rare occurrence and the Theravada focus remained firmly on Sakyamuni. Mahayana scriptures, however, introduced many new buddhas, each existing in their own celestial world but able to commune with and be of help to people. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 'Buddha of Infinite Light', Amitabha, who gave rise to Pure Land Buddhism, the largest form of Buddhism in Japan and one of the most influential forms of Mahayana Buddhism. The focus of belief for Pure Land Buddhists is no longer Sakyamuni but Amitabha, who is believed to reside in a Western celestial paradise and who made a vow to save all those who sincerely call upon him for help. Pure Land stands in sharp contrast to the Theravadan emphasis on self-realisation of the *Dhamma*. There is a keen awareness of human sin and inability to reach perfection by human effort, thus the need to turn to the Buddha Amitabha and rely on his grace.

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<sup>19</sup> This doctrine has been given various interpretations by different Mahayana schools. For a brief introduction to the *Trikaya* see "On the Bodies of the Buddha" in Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 167-184.

Mahayana devotion also extended to many *bodhisattvas*, some mythological, of whom Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, is prominent. Avalokitesvara is often depicted in statue form with many hands and eyes, which emphasise the *bodhisattva's* awareness of sentient beings in suffering and readiness to help them. The *bodhisattvas* are seen as ideal representations of pure psychological states who aid meditation practice, but they also came to figure greatly in the pietistic worship of ordinary people. It was believed that a *bodhisattva* could assume various forms in order to help sentient beings and to grant miraculous favours such as having children. Linked to such piety was the belief that buddhas and *bodhisattvas* had built up stores of merit from many lifetimes of compassionate and wise service, which could be transferred to people in suffering and desirous of help.<sup>20</sup> Tantric Buddhism, while agreeing with Mahayana developments, placed great stress on the philosophical concept of non-dualism and the role of symbolism, especially the use of mandalas, mudras, and mantras in ritual and meditation.<sup>21</sup> Esoteric teachings and practices also play a much more prominent role in Tantra, which are meant only to be communicated by a learned lama to a disciple who is well established on the Buddha's path.<sup>22</sup>

Of the many schools that developed in the Mahayana tradition, some clearly reflected the blending of Buddhist thought with the indigenous cultural traits of peoples that missionary Buddhism encountered. It is often remarked, for example, how Ch'an Buddhism (Zen) reflects the practical attitude of the Chinese, with its emphasis on hard work and experience of *satori* (enlightenment/ awakening) in everyday life situations.<sup>23</sup> Also, the way in which T'ien-t'ai Buddhism in China attempted to collate the vast Mahayana canon of scripture, providing it with an internal structure that sought to explain the contradictions which arose within it, bears witness to influence from the harmonising tendency of Chinese culture. In general, Buddhism in Asia absorbed and modified the various indigenous religious

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<sup>20</sup> In Theravada Buddhist countries the belief in transferable merit is also strong, and merit-making ceremonies are a central feature of Buddhist ritual.

<sup>21</sup> In the Buddhist tradition mandalas are usually symbolic pictorial representations of the universe; mudras are symbolic gestures of the hands; and mantras are words or syllables thought to have sacred power. For a brief description of how visualisation techniques and mantras are used in Tibetan Buddhist meditation see Elizabeth J. Harris, *What Buddhists Believe* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 82-84.

<sup>22</sup> Lama, literally 'Higher One', is a spiritual teacher in Tantric Buddhism, who can be either ordained or lay. Tantric Buddhism describes the mainline Mahayana tradition as *sutra* (scripture) based, exoteric in contrast to Tantra's esoteric approach.

<sup>23</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (London: Luzac and Co., 1927; New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), 103-105. The Chinese word Ch'an, Zen in Japanese, comes from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meaning 'meditation.'



beliefs of peoples. In Thailand, for instance, 'folk Buddhism' incorporates belief in various *phis* or spirits that are present in Thai primal religion. In most countries there is a clear-cut distinction between the power and significance of the spirits and that of the Buddha. However, there has always been a danger that the primal religiosity of people would dominate and obscure Buddhist beliefs. There is evidence of this in syncretistic folk religions and new religious movements that have developed in East Asia where Buddhist, Taoist and primal religious beliefs blend into a mixture where it is difficult to ascertain the significance of Buddhist belief.<sup>24</sup>

Buddhism, then, is a religion of immense diversity in worship and philosophical outlook. Theravada and Pure Land views, for example, seem to be diametrically opposed to each other over the issue of relying on one's own self or another power for liberation. However, from the Buddha's time on, doctrine in Buddhism has been conceived as a means to an end. The Buddha himself compared his teachings to a raft that helps a person to cross a river. Once across, the raft is of no use on the other side.<sup>25</sup> In a similar fashion Zen speaks of doctrine as being like a finger pointing to the moon (*satori*), warning that the finger should not be confused with the moon itself.<sup>26</sup> As non-attachment in the sensual realm is taught in Buddhism so it is extended to different religious opinions and doctrines. Somewhat paradoxically, this has enabled a plurality of different viewpoints to emerge. Instead of doctrine the stress in Buddhism moves to praxis. An introduction to Buddhism explains:

Even in its most lofty flights of speculation, Buddhism has always – at least in principle – made orthodoxy subservient to orthopraxis. By this is not meant a social morality that insists on putting doctrinal convictions to work in practice, but rather learning that what one experiences in religious practice is itself the truth of doctrine.<sup>27</sup>

The ultimate truth transcends doctrine and is to be discovered through praxis aided by doctrine. The witness that this truth has been realised is to be seen in the wise counsel and compassionate life of the Buddhist. So, for the Buddhist, the value of the Buddha's teaching is to be seen first and foremost in the fruits it produces in the life

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<sup>24</sup> An example of the mix of beliefs at the folk level, based on a study carried out in a Chinese village, is given by Tam Wai Lun, "A Snapshot of Chinese Village Spirituality," *The Way* 39, no. 2 (1999): 173-182. For an overview of new religious movements in East Asia that combine ideas from Buddhism and other religions see Julia Ching, "East Asian Religions," in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996), 436-461.

<sup>25</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> Suzuki, *Essays: First Series*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Staff of the Nanzan Institute, "Introduction," in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori et al. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1993), xxiv.

of the disciple, not in dogmatic assertions. Throughout its history, Buddhism has also shown a degree of tolerance towards other religious beliefs, recognising that, if they benefit society and enable the person to mature morally, they must be of some worth and related to ultimate truth.

## 1.3 The Buddhist Community and Contemporary Buddhism

### 1.3.1 The Monastic Heart of Buddhism

At the heart of the Buddhist religion down the centuries stands the *Sangha*, the congregation of the Buddha's disciples, and the last component of the 'Three Jewels.' The word *Sangha* refers to communities of sincere Buddhists in general, including lay and ordained members. However, it is often used to speak only of the ordained communities of monks and nuns within Buddhism. Damien Keown commented:

The Buddhist order of monks (*Sangha*) is the world's oldest and most widespread continuous social institution and it may be claimed with some justification that monasticism is a Buddhist invention.<sup>28</sup>

Monks were originally encouraged to lead a wandering life and today they often continue to move between temples. Where Buddhism was established, temples became centres of village and town life with monastics serving the pastoral and religious needs of local communities. According to tradition, the ordained members of the *Sangha* and the mass of the laity live in an interdependent relationship, each with their own responsibilities: the monastics care for the spiritual needs of the people through teaching *Dhamma* and meditation, while the laity supply the material needs of food, clothing and shelter in return. This emphasis on mutual giving is understood in terms of the religious practice of *dana* (offering/generosity) in Buddhism. Women were ordained during the Buddha's lifetime but nuns have often been considered to be of lower status than their male counterparts. The Buddha is reported as saying in the Pali scriptures that the institution of a nun's order would lead to a faster decline in the practice of the *Dhamma*, though the authority of this passage is contested by some Buddhists.<sup>29</sup> In Theravada countries the order of nuns

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<sup>28</sup> Damien Keown, "Christian Ethics in the Light of Buddhist Ethics," *The Expository Times* 106, February (1995): 133.

<sup>29</sup> Some scholars hold that a negative attitude towards women was a later textual interpolation and that the Buddha favoured greater equality between the sexes. For a careful textual consideration of some of the arguments, which favours a more egalitarian position in the light of an analysis of the monastic

died out and, though a few nuns have recently been ordained in the United States and India, the order's re-institution has yet to be accepted by leading Theravadan monks.<sup>30</sup> Only in the Chinese Mahayana tradition has there been a continuous lineage of nuns down till present times.

The Buddha applied a tribal structure of community to the *Sangha*, which encouraged decisions to be made communally either by consensus or by vote. He appointed no successor to his authority and no strict hierarchical organisation was placed upon the running of the *Sangha*. Monks were expected to live a life of simplicity with the minimum of possessions, to be celibate, beg for their food, practice meditation, teach *Dhamma* to the laity, and to follow the monastic rules thought to be given by the Buddha.<sup>31</sup> As time passed many monks gave up an itinerant lifestyle and settled in monasteries, which came under the rule of abbots. The practice of the daily alms round has also largely fallen away and the accumulation of wealth by the *Sangha*, through the gifting of land and money, has often called into question the monastic simplicity of life. In the Mahayana tradition, notably in Japan, some orders allowed monks to marry and the running of their temples have been handed down from father to son.

The mendicant monk in Buddhism stands as a symbol of renunciation of family ties and worldly concerns, but from earliest days, when the Buddha counselled rulers and accepted gifts of land from them, the *Sangha* has often had close relationships with centres of political power. Monks, for example, were often at the forefront in leading and supporting nationalist movements against colonial rule in Asia.<sup>32</sup> In Tibet, the lamas exercised direct political as well as religious power. In some countries today however, as in Thailand, it is the state that takes a leading role in defining the overall structure of the *Sangha* and its ruling council. Such close

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rules for monks and nuns, see In Young Chung, "A Buddhist View of Women: A Comparative Study of the Rules for *Bhik.su.niss* and *Bhik.sus* based on the Chinese *Praatimok.sa*," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics (JBE)* 6 (1999): 29-105 [journal on-line]; available from <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/6/chung991.pdf>; Internet; accessed 11 August 1999.

<sup>30</sup> The last inscribed reference to a Theravada order of nuns, in Burma, comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For reference to the recent struggle for ordained nuns to be accepted in the Sri Lankan context see Asanga Thilekaratne, "Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: 1948-1998," *Dialogue* n.s. 25 & 26 (1998-1999): 243. For a general introduction to the position of women in Buddhism see Nancy J. Barnes, "Women in Buddhism," in *Today's Woman in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 137-169.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview of the practice of meditation in various Buddhist traditions see Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 65-88. Monastic rules are contained in the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Buddhist canon. At the centre of this is the disciplinary code, the *Patimokkha*, consisting of 227 rules (Theravada tradition) covering topics relating to various aspects of moral and social behaviour for monks. The Chinese *Patimokkha* has 250 rules, the Tibetan 253.

<sup>32</sup> This was the case in Sri Lanka, Burma and Vietnam. Ken Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1989), 260.

relationships between state and religion have benefited the growth of Buddhism, but at times they have also hastened its downfall. Testimony to this is found in many examples throughout history of persecutions and the forced laicisation of monks and nuns by rulers fearful of monastic power.

### 1.3.2 Buddhism Today

Despite setbacks, Buddhism remains a significant religious force in Asia today, both among the rural poor and urban rich. The rapid industrialisation of many Asian countries has brought about new challenges, but materialism has not necessarily led to the death of religion. Japanese society, where Buddhism is often associated with funerals and rites for the dead, has seen the formation of new movements mainly led by lay people, with a strong social and political message, notably Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai associated with Nichiren Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> Both these organisations stress the importance of material prosperity. Rissho Kosei-kai is recognised internationally for its work in the religious peace movement while Soka Gakkai, known for its militant missionary campaigns, founded a national political party, *Komeito*, which entered into coalition government for the first time in 1993.<sup>34</sup> Taiwan in recent years has seen growth in various Buddhist schools, with many young people attending intensive meditation courses and taking up monastic life. Benoit Vermander commented on the social relevance of this growth:

The austerities of many monasteries in Taiwan as well as the time devoted to meditation and charitable pursuits indeed transcends and challenges Taiwan's consumerism and social restlessness.<sup>35</sup>

In Taiwan nuns play a significant role in teaching meditation and *Dhamma*, and have taken a leading role in developing social welfare programmes. However, in Thailand, where there is a strong Buddhist national identity, social tensions are emerging as Buddhist monks and sects are accused of compromising their simplicity of life in favour of consumerism. This can be seen in the continuing political and religious arguments, covered for several years in the Thai media, about the interests of the

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<sup>33</sup> Nichiren was a zealous and controversial Buddhist leader of the 13<sup>th</sup> century who formed a new Buddhist tradition in Japan based around worship of the *Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law* or simply *Lotus Sutra*, a central Mahayana Buddhist text. See Masaharu Anesaki, *Nichiren: The Buddhist Prophet* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1916).

<sup>34</sup> The Rissho Kosei-kai organisation has around 5 million members. Soka Gakkai has a similarly large following. For a review of the political and religious debates surrounding the role of *Komeito* see Robert Kisala, "Sōka Gakkai, Kōmeitō, and the Separation of Religion and State in Japan," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (BNIRC)* 18 (1994): 7-17.

<sup>35</sup> Benoit Vermander, "Christianity and the Taiwanese Religious Landscape," *The Way* 39, no. 2 (1999): 137.



*Dhammakaya* sect which owns huge tracts of land and encourages large financial donations in order to achieve corresponding merit.<sup>36</sup> Different challenges face Buddhists in other places in modern Asia. In some countries the ruling elite, as in Vietnam and China, looks upon Buddhism with suspicion and hostility. In Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Buddhism is confronted with human suffering from war and poverty on an unprecedented scale. The same is true in Sri Lanka where Buddhism is faced with the difficult task of both asserting its national identity after centuries of neglect under colonial rulers and the need to be a force for reconciliation in the war between Sinhala and Tamil peoples.<sup>37</sup>

In recent centuries Asian Buddhism has had to respond to Western ideas and values, first through the encounter with colonialism, more recently with the forces of globalisation in the economic and cultural spheres and also in the growing dialogue between Western and Asian Buddhists. During the twentieth century there was growth in Buddhist lay movements and, in recent decades, in women's movements in Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> Another significant and related development in contemporary Buddhism, which has been compared to the influence of liberation theology in Christianity,<sup>39</sup> is the advent of 'Engaged Buddhism.' This is a movement that draws support from both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists across Asia and worldwide, and is served by a co-ordinating body - the 'International Network of Engaged Buddhists' (INEB).<sup>40</sup> Buddhism has throughout the past 2500 years given rise to many sincere attempts to meet the needs of the poor, sick and marginalised in society. Engaged Buddhism, however, represents a new movement that seeks to respond to social, political and environmental issues from a Buddhist perspective, and offer alternatives to the spread of consumerist values across the Asian continent. The movement traces its modern beginnings to the struggle of Vietnamese monks and nuns against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>41</sup> An important figure

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<sup>36</sup> For example, see "Wat Phra Dhammakaya: Police Expect to make 40 more Arrests." *Bangkok Post*, 14 September 1999: 1 page. Newspaper on-line. Available from <http://www.bkkpost.samart.co.th/news/BParchive/BP19990914/14099News09.html>; Internet. Accessed 24 July 2000

<sup>37</sup> Buddhist monks have been accused of siding with Sinhalese nationalists in condoning violence against Tamils. Many monks, however, have not supported such actions and several organisations of politically minded monks and lay people who seek a peaceful and just solution to the ethnic war in Sri Lanka have been established. Thilekaratne, "Fifty Years of Buddhism," 241.

<sup>38</sup> The development of various lay and woman's movements in Buddhism in recent years is covered in Barnes, "Women in Buddhism," 137-169.

<sup>39</sup> John D'Archy May, "What do Socially Engaged Buddhists and Christian Liberation Theologians Have to Say to One Another?" *Dialogue* n.s. 21 (1994): 1.

<sup>40</sup> The INEB publishes a journal from Bangkok three times a year called *Seeds of Peace*.

<sup>41</sup> For a historical overview and outline of Engaged Buddhism see Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1-44.

then, and now, is the exiled Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Other leaders associated with the movement are the Dalai Lama (leader of the Tibetan people in exile), Aung San Suu Kyi (the leader of Burma's democracy movement), Maha Ghosananda (a Cambodian monk working for reconciliation in his country), and Sulak Sivaraksa (a Thai social critic and activist). Common to these leaders and others in the movement is the belief that Buddhism gives moral and political guidance to solving social injustices and environmental crises. This social concern cuts across doctrinal differences within Buddhism and also draws Buddhists into cooperation with similarly minded people of other religions. At the same time as promoting a strong social commitment, Engaged Buddhism emphasises the traditional need for personal development through meditation, training in mindfulness (*sati*),<sup>42</sup> and a strict moral life as the basis for social transformation.

Surveying the contemporary Buddhist world in the late 1970s, Heinrich Dumoulin commented: "We may say that modern Buddhism does not see itself as a religion of extinction but as a way towards liberation."<sup>43</sup> Buddhism, then, remains a vibrant religious force in Asia capable of renewing itself in the face of new social challenges. It may be difficult at times to gauge the extent of the Buddhist commitment of people (especially among East Asians who may not define themselves exclusively as Buddhists) and to know how Buddhism has fared under communist China. Also, it is uncertain how Buddhism will cope with the ever-increasing spread of consumerist values in Asian societies. However, with the possible exceptions of South Korea and China, Buddhists have not been converting to other religions or atheism in great numbers. It looks certain, therefore, that Buddhism is destined to exert an important influence on the religious and social life of Asian societies in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>42</sup> Mindfulness (*sati*) - an acute awareness of mind that penetrates into the formation and dissolution of physical and mental phenomena - is a crucial aspect of Buddhist practice that leads to insight and wisdom.

<sup>43</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin, "Buddhism - A Religion of Liberation," in *Buddhism and Christianity*, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies Series, ed. Claude Geffré and Mariasusai Dhavamony (New York: Seabury Press, 1979; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 29. Liberation (*vimokkha*) is a key term used in Buddhism to describe the Buddhist religious goal and nature of enlightenment.

## Chapter 2

# Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Asia

## 2.1 Old Precedents and New Beginnings in Dialogue - A Historical Sketch

### 2.1.1 Early Dialogue - Nestorians and Others

There is no evidence that Jesus had contact with Buddhism. An Asian theologian, R. S. Sugirtharajah, has recently argued that scholars have not given enough attention to the possibility that Buddhism and other Asian religions could have influenced the religious culture of early Palestine, the early church, and even Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup> Christian knowledge of Buddhism does stretch back far, certainly to the time of the Church Fathers. Clement of Alexandria was the first Christian theologian to leave textual evidence of an awareness of Buddhism (c. 202 CE), making an appreciative reference to Buddhist followers and to the “exceptional sanctity” of the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> Jerome (382-420) was the last Western Christian to refer to Buddhism in this early period, with a mention of the Buddha’s miraculous birth.<sup>3</sup> The rise of Islam served to reduce the possibilities for contact between Buddhists and Western Christians.

Yet a significant dialogue between Christians and Buddhists in Asia took place before the Christianisation of central Europe was complete. Several centuries before the first Franciscan and Jesuit missions to East Asia, significant encounters in China between Buddhists and Persian Christians of the Syriac Church, often called Nestorians, had taken place. In 1625 a large stone tablet called the Nestorian Monument was discovered in Changan (modern Xi’an) dating back to 781 CE. The Monument records the arrival of Christianity in China during the T’ang dynasty in

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 112-120.

<sup>2</sup> John Ferguson, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: Clement of Alexandria. Stromteits: Books One to Three* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 76. Ferguson argues that Clement probably had no personal contact with Buddhism and that the dialogue was not of any significant depth.

<sup>3</sup> For reference to Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and others, see David A. Scott, “Christian Responses to Buddhism in Pre-medieval Times,” *Numen* 32, no. 1 (1985): 88-90.

the year 635, where it became known as the 'Luminous Religion.' The inscription on the Monument was composed by Ching-ching (or Adam), a Nestorian bishop and missionary scholar of the eighth century in China.

Evidence in various forms suggests that from the period of the seventh century onwards there were significant Christian-Buddhist encounters resulting in a mutual respect between the religions and mutual learning from each other's traditions. Christians borrowed Buddhist concepts and terms to translate doctrine. This can be seen, for example, in the Nestorian Monument itself and also in a treatise by the early Christian missionary, Alopen, who employed the Buddhist term *sunyata* to communicate the idea that God was beyond conceptualisation.<sup>4</sup> Other findings point towards a close relationship: most notably, many Nestorian crosses have been uncovered that depict the cross resting on a lotus flower (a Buddhist symbol of purity); Christian figures have been found painted in Buddhist caves in East Turkistan and other places; there is evidence of a church building in Shuipang borrowing from a Buddhist stupa for its architecture; and, in Dunhuang, a painting on silk, predating 1024 CE, depicts Jesus in the form of a *bodhisattva*. It is also known that Ching-ching collaborated with a famous Indian Buddhist monk, Prajna, in the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese. Taken together these pieces of historical evidence suggest the existence of a significant Christian-Buddhist dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

Some scholars have claimed that the Nestorians close association with Buddhism played a major part in the demise of the Christian community in China. By 1500 there were few Christians left in East Asia. The Nestorian attempt to "clothe their faith in dress familiar to the Chinese,"<sup>6</sup> it was argued, may have caused them to appear as just another Buddhist sect to the populace. The Nestorians were criticised for straying too much down a syncretistic path in their relationship with Buddhism, which robbed Christianity of its defining beliefs, led to a loss of evangelistic fervour, and brought about the inevitable decline of the Christian community in the East.<sup>7</sup> Against such views, however, modern scholars hold that the Nestorians were not syncretistic but rather sought to inculturate their Christian faith through dialogue

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<sup>4</sup> Reference to Alopen can be found in Ibid, 93-94. Alopen was, according to the Nestorian Monument, the Persian monk who brought the Christian faith to the court of Emperor T'ai Tsung in 635.

<sup>5</sup> John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity: The Churches of the East before the Year 1500* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge [ISPCK]; Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia [CCA], 1996), 69-87. Photographs of the Nestorian Monument, Nestorian crosses, and the depiction of Jesus in the form of a *bodhisattva*, are inserted between pages 90-91.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (London: SPCK, 1929), 59.

<sup>7</sup> John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 253.

with Buddhism, in order that Buddhists would better understand it. They recognised within Buddhism much that was compatible with Christian teachings and therefore to be honoured. Thus, Metropolitan Georges Khodr commented that the Nestorian missionary tradition was, in contrast to the exclusiveness of the dominant Western missionary tradition, “Almost unique in its efforts to nurture the spiritual development of the religions it encountered by ‘improving’ them from within (Buddhism in Tibet and China), while not ‘alienating’ them.”<sup>8</sup> Other factors, such as religious persecution and internal divisions, are considered to have been of more significance in the demise of Christianity in the East.<sup>9</sup> It is also pointed out that the Nestorians exerted a Christian influence on the spirituality of their Buddhist neighbours, with Buddhists borrowing Christian ideas relating to the Communion of Saints and the observance of Lent.<sup>10</sup> Further research by Sinologists and others may in the future uncover more detail of Nestorian contacts with Buddhism in China and other instances of early dialogue in countries such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> From the current evidence available it can be surmised that Christians in China entered eagerly into a dialogue with Buddhism.

As well as the Nestorians of the distant past, there are more recent examples of Christians who preceded and laid foundations for the contemporary concern for dialogue. These include Hermann Gundert, who went to Japan in 1906 and entered into dialogue with Zen Buddhism,<sup>12</sup> and Karl Reichelt in the 1920s, who established a dialogue centre in Hong Kong and drew inspiration from the early Nestorian dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Asian Christians were themselves influenced by Buddhism. Masao Takenaka, for example, recounts how several Japanese Christians were inspired by a popular Zen monk, Ryōkan (1758-1831), to recast Christian faith in “Japanese dress” using Buddhist thought.<sup>14</sup> Asian Christians involved in dialogue today with

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<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Georges Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World - The Economy of the Holy Spirit,” in *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: Documents and Statements 1902-1975*, ed. Constantin G. Patelos (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1978), 302.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume I* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 312.

<sup>10</sup> England, *The Hidden History*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> There is evidence that shows cooperation between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka from the 5th century on and also early on in Java and Japan. England, *The Hidden History*, 94, 97-98, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Finkbeiner, “Christian-Buddhist Encounters: Mission and Dialogue in Japan,” *Current Dialogue* 18 (1990): 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph R. Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese*, American Society of Missiology Series No. 11 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 128-132; Rolv Olsen, “‘The Wind Blows Wherever it Pleases’: A Study of Contextualisation of Christian Worship Services at Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 87, no. 4 (1999): 555-632.

<sup>14</sup> Masao Takenaka, “Ryōkan and Christians in Japan,” *Japanese Religions* 21, no. 2 (1996): 330.



Buddhism, then, can refer to historical precedents in dialogue that may yet hold lessons for the future of interreligious encounter.

### 2.1.2 The Western Missionary Legacy

The latter decades of the twentieth century saw a renewed desire on the part of Christians worldwide to enter into dialogue with Buddhism. As participants in this fresh concern for dialogue, Asian Christians have taken on an increasingly important role in seeking to foster a deeper dialogue between the two religions. Factors such as a greater respect towards other religious traditions, theologians seeking to engage with their cultural contexts, the impetus for dialogue provided by the Second Vatican Council, collaboration on issues of peace and social justice, have all contributed to this new desire for dialogue. Despite the positive examples of early Christians involved in dialogue like the Nestorians, those involved today are aware that much reconciliation work is needed in order to overcome the mutual distrust and even hatred that has characterised Christian-Buddhist relationships over the past several centuries. Most of the blame for such ill will is directed at Western Christian missionaries. Their militant efforts to convert Buddhists and their condemnations of the Buddhist religion are well documented. Such was the case with Francis Xavier (d. 1552) in Japan and Matteo Ricci (d. 1610) in China, who spearheaded the Jesuit missions in East Asia. Though appreciative of Asian cultures, they had little respect for Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, missionaries to Theravada countries looked unfavourably upon Buddhism. In Sri Lanka the Buddhist monk, Walpola Rahula, complained that missionaries taught “*Sinhalese children to look down upon and despise Sinhala Buddhist culture as low and base - a thing inferior.*”<sup>16</sup> A missionary like C. C. Hanson in Thailand, who was positively disposed towards Buddhism, was denounced by his fellows and forced out of the US Presbyterian mission because he did not agree with “the sinfulness of northern Thai society and its traditional religion.”<sup>17</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda paints a similarly disturbing picture of the missionary encounter with Buddhists in Tibet. Despite receiving a warm welcome

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<sup>15</sup> For Francis Xavier see Finkbeiner, “Christian-Buddhist Encounters,” 26-28. For Ricci’s attitude towards Buddhism and the Chinese Buddhist reaction see Cha Kim-Kwong, “Buddhists’ Understanding of Christianity in Late Ming China: Implications for Interfaith Dialogue,” *Ching-Feng* 37, no. 3 (1994): 168-192.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Sarath Iddamalgoda, “Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation in Independent Sri Lanka,” *Dialogue* n.s. 25 & 26 (1998-1999): 317.

<sup>17</sup> Hanson was an American Presbyterian missionary. In 1909 the mission board refused to reappoint him to work in Thailand. Herbert R. Swanson, *Krischak Muang Nua: A Study in Northern Thai Church History* (Bangkok: Chuan Printing Press, 1984), 89.



from Buddhists, the missionaries refused to recognise any good in Tibetan Buddhism and denounced Buddhist worship and belief.<sup>18</sup> In Asia today Buddhism may no longer be denounced and dismissed in the same militant fashion as in previous centuries, but negative attitudes similar to those above persist among many Western missionaries and Asian Christians.<sup>19</sup> Dialogue between the two religions in Asia, then, is presented as a largely modern phenomenon with many obstacles to be overcome. The general impression given, in the words of one Christian, is that “dialogue has only just begun.”<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2 Contemporary Overview - A Dialogue of Many Parts

### 2.2.1 Introduction

A variety of motives can be discerned for the current interest in Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Asia. Where Evangelical Christians dialogue with Buddhism, for example, the purpose is often to have knowledge of Buddhists in order to evangelise them more effectively. To this end, Tissa Weerasingha from Sri Lanka speaks of the need to develop a “karmic Christology” for Buddhists.<sup>21</sup> Jesus, according to Weerasingha’s thought, is best presented to Buddhists as having a great store of merit accrued from his good karma, in particular from his sacrifice on the cross, which can be transferred to believers. Such a christology, Weerasingha claimed, forms a natural link to the Buddhist belief in transfer of merit from holy people to their disciples, and thus makes faith in Jesus more appealing to Buddhists. A Korean theologian working in Thailand, Hong-Shik Shin, himself a former Buddhist, similarly promoted the idea of developing contextual theologies and missionary practices so that the gospel would be more attractive to Buddhists. He recommended that missionaries adopt a humble, patient and serene attitude as favoured in Buddhism. He also suggested specific measures, such as removing pews from churches to copy the custom of Buddhist temples where worshippers sit on the

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<sup>18</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, “A Tibetan Buddhist Looks at Christianity,” in *The Cross and the Lotus: Christianity and Buddhism in Dialogue*, ed. G. W. Houston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 121-125.

<sup>19</sup> The persistence of such views can be seen in a publication of the ‘Gospel for Asia,’ a United States based mission organisation that gives financial and other support to Asian evangelists: K. P. Yohannan, ed., “Myanmar: 3 Reports,” *Send!* (Carrollton, Texas) 20, no. 1 (2000): 8-11.

<sup>20</sup> Jan Van Bragt, “Contributions of Buddhism to Christianity,” *BNIRC* no. 23 (1999): 7.

<sup>21</sup> Tissa Weerasingha, “Concepts of Salvation in Buddhism,” *Evangelical Review of Theology (ERT)* 15, no. 1 (1991): 75.

floor, in an attempt to appeal to Buddhist sensibilities.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Evangelicals would tend to say that Buddhism has little to add to the Christian understanding of God or religious truth. "Buddhism," wrote Weerasingha, "has some moral and ethical light although it has no redemptive light."<sup>23</sup> Dialogue is for a particular purpose - expansion of the church - which Buddhists would reject.

The concern in the remainder of this chapter is with those Christians who have taken a more positive view of Buddhism as a religion that can contribute both to Christian life and theology. In many cases their dialogue goes beyond a concern to better accommodate the Christian faith to Buddhist sensibilities and beliefs. Rather, they seek to learn from, share and work together with Buddhists. The overriding Evangelical motive for dialogue can be described as the desire to be better equipped for evangelism in order to convert Buddhists to the Christian faith. Perhaps the main motive of many of the Christians described below can best be expressed as seeking a 'mutual conversion,' where both Christian and Buddhist are led into a deeper experience of religious truth through appreciation of each other's tradition in the dialogical process. This, though, would not rule out the possibility of conversion from one religion to the other. Dialogue in Asia takes many forms. In order to reflect on the breadth of contemporary dialogue, the four kinds of dialogue outlined in 1992 by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (CEP) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) are considered - the "dialogue of life," the "dialogue of action," the "dialogue of theological exchange," and the "dialogue of religious experience"<sup>24</sup> - along with other forms.

### 2.2.2 The Dialogue of Life

First used as a term by the FABC to refer to the church's identification with the poor in Asia,<sup>25</sup> the dialogue of life is perhaps the most common form of dialogue in

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<sup>22</sup> Hong-Shik Shin, *Principles of Church Planting: as Illustrated in Thai Theravada Buddhist Context* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan [OMF Publishers], 1989), 105-107, 179-180.

<sup>23</sup> Tissa Weerasingha, "Evangelical Theology: The Buddhist Context," *Asia Theological News* 9, no. 1 (1983): 10.

<sup>24</sup> Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation (Excerpts)," *IBMR* 16, no. 2 (1992): 84. These four forms of dialogue were first proposed in 1985 by the Secretariat for Non-Christians, forerunner to the PCID: Secretariat for Non-Christians, "The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission," *IBMR* 9, no. 4 (1985): 191.

<sup>25</sup> Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1971 to 1991* (Quenzon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1992), xxv, 15; see also, D. Bosco M. Mariampillai, *The Emerging Asian Theology of Liberation in the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences 1974-1986* (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 1993), 258. The CEP's and PCID's description of the four forms of dialogue is

Asia and least reported. It occurs when Christians and Buddhists live together at the grassroots level and show a basic respect towards each other's life and religious traditions. This dialogue is most evident in poor rural communities where Christians and Buddhists live side by side and co-operate on the everyday mundane level of organising community life and maintaining friendly relations. A natural dialogue is entered into when people from both traditions join in the common task of earning a living and sharing in community responsibilities. Planting rice together in the fields, organising a community health project, or helping with funeral arrangements for a deceased villager - all are areas where Buddhists and Christians enter naturally into dialogue. At a more intimate level, marriage between Buddhists and Christians also involves such a dialogue for partners and their families. The motive for dialogue in these cases is not to enter into a formal exchange of religious views but a simple desire for good relations and community harmony, which demands a degree of openness towards the beliefs and practices of others.

Dialogue that takes place around the day-to-day issues of community life may refer little to explicit religious beliefs. However, even such everyday interaction is filled with religious significance. Both parties are continually aware of their differing religious identities and, especially in Asia, religious meaning and value are often judged in relation to everyday life experiences and relationships.<sup>26</sup> The dialogue of life can also have profound effect on those already consciously committed to dialogue. For example, the Devasaranaramaya Christian Ashram, founded in the 1950s in rural Sri Lanka, started up with the intent of dialoguing with Buddhism in the areas of contemplation and asceticism. The community, however, through living with the Buddhist rural poor and listening to their needs, came to see that social issues were of utmost importance. In time they were led to expand their dialogical concern by finding common ways of working for rural development and social justice with Buddhists, Marxists and Hindus.<sup>27</sup> The dialogue of life, then, can act as the basis for the development of dialogue on different levels.

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sufficiently broad to provide different interpretations of what they mean. Therefore, a short explanation is given at the beginning of each form in order to make clear how they are understood in this thesis.

<sup>26</sup> This has been my personal experience, shared by the Thai pastors with whom I worked in small rural villages in the north of Thailand. Buddhists judged the worth of the Christian religion more by the everyday ways in which Christians interacted with them and contributed to community life than by religious discussion or doctrinal claims.

<sup>27</sup> Yohan Devananda and Sarath Fernando, "Dialogue in the Context of Development: A Sri Lankan Experience," *Ecumenical Review (ER)* 37 (1985): 445-451.

### 2.2.3 The Dialogue of Action

The collaboration of Christians and Buddhists in order to tackle social injustices, work for community development, protect the environment, or seek peace in society, has become a central feature of interreligious dialogue in Asia. This dialogue of action has been encouraged by an increasing awareness of social issues and commitment to solving social injustices found in both religions since the 1960s, as seen in the proliferation of liberation theologies in Christianity and the growth of Engaged Buddhism. Centred on a common concern for humanity and the planet, this form of dialogue is considered by many to be a religious imperative given the social context of much of Asia, characterised by poverty, political oppression, and environmental destruction. On a practical level it promotes social welfare and encourages value systems capable of thwarting the increasing growth in materialism in Asia, but it also helps to reveal the liberating potential of religious teachings and thus enables a dialogue with the heart of each religion to emerge.<sup>28</sup> This, it is further claimed, guards against intellectualism, elitism, and social irrelevance, which is a danger when dialogue is limited to doctrinal matters.

The dialogue of action also enables both religions to learn from each other's strengths. Masao Abe, for example, admitted that Buddhists must learn from the strong sense of history and ethical responsibility found in Christianity.<sup>29</sup> A concrete example of this is the Taiwanese nun Zhengyan, who was inspired by the work of Christians to set up what has become one of the largest social welfare organisations in Taiwan, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association (BCRTCA).<sup>30</sup> The 'Catholic Council of Thailand for Development' (CCTD) is an example, on the other hand, of an Asian Christian organisation that has learned from Buddhism in its development work. Working with Buddhist communities, the CCTD seeks to promote Buddhist values in its ministry. This can be seen in its efforts to encourage the practice of *dana* (generosity/donation). Buddhist villagers, in cooperation with the CCTD and Buddhist monks, have developed the concept of *dana*, associated with lay people's daily donation of food to sustain the monks, by applying it to donations of rice for communal benefit to the village and poor in particular. Here a Christian body in Asia has supported practices based on Buddhist values and culture in a

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<sup>28</sup> Baw Tananone, "A Call for Solidarity: A Thai Experience," in *Theology and Cultures*, Doing Theology with Asian Resources Series: Vol. 2, ed. Yeow Choo Lak, (Singapore: Association for Theological Education in South East Asia [ATESEA], 1995), 233-240; Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 71-84, 131-134.

<sup>29</sup> Masao Abe, "A Rejoinder," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 180-184.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 203.

struggle for sustainable community development.<sup>31</sup> Another notable example is the 'Christian Workers Fellowship' (CWF) in Sri Lanka. Since 1958 the CWF has actively engaged with similarly minded Buddhists in a socialist concern for social justice that respects Buddhist values.<sup>32</sup>

#### 2.2.4 The Dialogue of Theological Exchange

Freed from the past constraints of a largely exclusivist theology of religions inherited from the West, many Asian Christians have entered into dialogue on a theological level with enthusiasm.<sup>33</sup> For some Christians the primary value of this dialogue is that it helps to develop contextual theologies - enabling Christian beliefs to be rethought and reformulated to take account of the Buddhist cultural context. An example of this would be Kazoh Kitamori's book *Theology of the Pain of God*, where he seeks to communicate a theology about God's suffering in part through dialogue with Japanese Buddhist thought.<sup>34</sup> Others, however, go further. In rethinking Christian beliefs through dialogue they find challenges to traditional dogmas that, in some cases, cause them to extend their understanding of what may be considered orthodox.

Reflection on the person and work of Jesus has been of central importance in dialogue of this nature. Korean Christians have, for example, applied the image of the compassionate *bodhisattva* to Jesus. The thought of Chung Hyun Kyung, a Korean feminist theologian, has come to international attention. At the 1991 World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra she caused controversy by her use of Shamanistic ritual and by suggesting that the feminine image of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was a suitable image for Jesus and for the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup> Hee-Sung Keel, another Korean, speaks of his unease with Western christology and encourages Asians to adopt the title of *bodhisattva* for Jesus as a meaningful expression in the Buddhist context. He then goes on to speculate about God's being in Buddhist terms, suggesting it is possible to affirm that "Emptiness [*sunyata*] is the ontological

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<sup>31</sup> Catholic Council of Thailand for Development, *Rice From Our Field* (Bangkok: Catholic Council of Thailand for Development, 1990), 81-94.

<sup>32</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, "Christian Workers' Fellowship of Sri Lanka," in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?* Concilium 1993/2, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (London: SCM Press, 1993), 121-130.

<sup>33</sup> Buddhists might prefer to speak of an exchange of *Dhamma*.

<sup>34</sup> Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 5th ed. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, "Come, Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation," in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, WCC Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia 7-20 February 1991*, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 37-47. The outraged response particularly of the Orthodox participants at the gathering can be sensed in pages 280-281.



concept of [God's] love, and love is the personal manifestation of Emptiness."<sup>36</sup> Several Japanese theologians have also engaged with Buddhist thought in the reformulation of christology. Seiichi Yagi, for example, has built up a friendship with a Zen monk and entered into dialogue with different forms of Japanese Buddhism. He questioned the ontologically-defined divine status that Western theology ascribes to Jesus. Instead, he makes a distinction between Christ and Jesus: Christ is a name for the divine truth within Jesus, given through the Logos, which is the primary presence of God/the Ultimate; Jesus is the human person who came to know the divine truth and who, like the historical Buddha, teaches and encourages people to discover this truth.<sup>37</sup>

A variety of other theological themes are also shown to be challenged and refined through dialogue. Lynn de Silva, a pioneer of Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Sri Lanka, for example, revealed how the Buddhist understanding of *anatta* can lead to a reassessment and purification of Christian notions of the self. Through dialogue he became more aware of, and recognised as being unbiblical, the Greek concept of independently existing souls that has influenced Christian theology.<sup>38</sup> Raimundo Panikkar is another theologian to consider the challenge of Buddhist thought for Christian theology and an understanding of God. Buddhism's refusal to speculate on the ultimate nature of *nirvana* has led him to appreciate, with greater clarity, that all theological formulations are imperfect when forced to speak of God, who is essentially beyond conception. Moreover, this dialogue convinced him that a profound silence lies at the heart of God's being - not that God is silence but that "God's silence is precisely a silence of being."<sup>39</sup> The Indian theologian, George Soares-Prabhu, has taken a different route in dialogue. He has been one of the first to demonstrate how intertextual studies, where a gospel text is analysed and compared with a Buddhist scriptural text, can lead to a more profound grasp of the original message of each passage. In a study of a mission command by the Buddha alongside the Great Commission passage of Matthew's gospel he showed that the former helped to reveal implicit meaning in the Christian text that could be easily

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<sup>36</sup> Hee-Sung Keel, "Jesus the Bodhisattva: Christology from a Buddhist Perspective," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 16 (1996): 182.

<sup>37</sup> Seiichi Yagi, "Christ and Buddha," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Faith and Cultures Series, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 25-45. The Zen monk speaks of his friendship with Yagi in Ryōmin Akizuki, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue," *Inter-Religio* 14 (1988): 38-54.

<sup>38</sup> Lynn de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Colombo: Study Centre for Religion and Society, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Silence of God: the Answer of the Buddha*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 171.

overlooked on a cursory reading.<sup>40</sup> The Buddhist text tells of the Buddha sending out his first sixty disciples to spread the *Dhamma*. Soares-Prabhu argued that this text serves to warn Christians not to read the Great Commission of Jesus as a militant call to convert the heathen as done in the past. Rather, when read in conjunction with the Buddhist text, the Christian is reminded that the Commission was given to disciples who had been ‘enlightened’ through their encounter with Jesus, and it was this enlightenment they were meant to share with others. The Buddhist text also pointed clearly to the welfare of all people as the purpose of mission, which Christians often forgot when reading the Matthew text where the nations are treated as objects of conversion. Such intertextual study, then, is shown to help Christians deepen their understanding of the gospel message.

One common motive for those involved in dialogue at the theological level appears to be a desire to break free from the constraints of Western theology, which has been largely influenced by Greek and Latin thought, and to develop theologies that reflect Asian thought forms and insights. This kind of dialogue is, however, often carried out at an academic and intellectual level that struggles to touch the lives of ordinary church members.

### 2.2.5 The Dialogue of Religious Experience

The area of dialogue that centres around religious experience often finds expression in shared silent meditation and participation in each other’s religious services and festivals. One of the most important pioneers in this dialogue was the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who died tragically while attending an interreligious conference near Bangkok in 1968. He spoke of the need to “create a new language of prayer” that would transcend religious traditions and arise out of a shared love.<sup>41</sup> Christian monastics from the West and Asian Buddhists have remained at the forefront of this dialogue of religious experience, organising a number of international conferences and monastic exchange visits. Here the emphasis is on a shared experience of the mystery of ultimate truth/God that lies beyond religious differences in dogma and confessional stance.<sup>42</sup> This dialogue has also encouraged

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<sup>40</sup> George M. Soares-Prabhu, “Two Mission Commands: An Interpretation of Matthew 28: 16-20 in the Light of a Buddhist Text,” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, nos. 2 & 3 (1994): 264-282. The Buddhist text is *Mahavagga* 1.10-11.1, which forms part of the Pali *Vinaya Pitaka*.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Merton, “New Language of Prayer,” in *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, ed. Susan Walker (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 224.

<sup>42</sup> For a report on how such dialogue proceeds and what issues arise see Walker, *Speaking of Silence* (1987).

several Christians to integrate Buddhist meditative techniques and religious practices into their own Christian spirituality. Thus it was reported that in 1992 there were at least fourteen Catholic religious and priests recognised as teachers of Zen meditation.<sup>43</sup>

The dialogue of religious experience is also found among Christians in Asia, notably in Japan. The Jesuit priest, Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle, first began Zen meditation in 1942. Others followed after him, including another Jesuit, William Johnston. Lassalle argued that Zen practice could help Christians to renew their prayer life and actually helped some who had drifted away from Christian faith to return to a belief in God.<sup>44</sup> The Japanese Carmelite priest, Augustine Ichiro Okumura, is another who has entered deeply into an experiential dialogue with Buddhist meditation, especially Zen. In his writing on prayer, Okumura refers continually to stories of Zen monks and Zen meditative techniques, and interweaves these with gospel passages on prayer and stories from Christian monastic traditions.<sup>45</sup> All three of the above Catholics were careful to assert, however, that God and *satori* are not equivalent realities and that, for the Christian, the ground and goal of meditation remains the reality of a loving God. In recent years, Japanese Christians such as Matsuoka Yukako have also taken up Zen meditation and others have learned from the *Nembutsu* practice, a form of repetitive chant recited by Pure Land Buddhists through which they express their trust in the mercy of Amitabha Buddha.<sup>46</sup> Chinese Christians too have sought to incorporate Buddhist meditation into their spirituality. Chewn Jiuan A. Lee, a Catholic nun, for example, seeks to combine both Zen and Theravada meditation techniques in her own spiritual discipline. Through these she has been led to appreciate silence in prayer, and to move towards a deeper experience of God's mystery beyond what she says are the immature dualistic thoughts that dominate in traditional forms of Christian prayer. She also spoke of having a new experience of scripture through incorporating basic Mahayana perspectives into her outlook. Buddhism encouraged her to be attentive to the immediate meaning of the text for the present moment, so freeing the text from

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Hawk, "Authority (1): The Role of the Teacher in Buddhist/Christian Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation* (Duquesne University, Pittsburgh) 14, no. 1 (1993): 23.

<sup>44</sup> H. M. Enomiya-Lasalle, "Experience of God in Zen and Methods Towards It," *Cistercian Studies* 9, nos. 2 & 3 (1974): 200-209.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine Ichiro Okumura, *Awakening to Prayer*, trans. Theresa Kazue Hiraki and Albert Masaru Yamato (Originally published in Japanese as *Inori*, Tokyo: Joshi Pauro Kai, 1974; Washington: ICS Publications, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> Martin Repp, "NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto: 35 Years of Interreligious Encounter in an Ecumenical Context," *Inter-Religio* 27 (1995): 34.

having to be understood primarily by historical or intellectual analysis.<sup>47</sup> There is, then, a growing recognition that Christianity can learn from the meditative traditions and techniques of Buddhism that have been developed and refined over centuries. Outside of Japan and East Asia the dialogue of religious experience is also evident if less intense. Christians, for example, often visit the Suan Mohkk monastery of Buddhadasa in South Thailand in search of a deeper experience of Buddhist meditation. Several theologians influenced by dialogue with Buddhism have also advocated the incorporation of silence and meditation into Christian liturgy and prayer.<sup>48</sup>

The legitimacy of the dialogue of religious experience was greatly enhanced by the Pope's gathering of religious leaders from around the world, including Buddhists, to participate in a day of prayer at Assisi in 1986. However, this form of dialogue is in some ways the most contentious for Buddhists and Christians. It calls into question assumptions about the spirituality of one's own tradition and presuppositions about the existence of God and other theological issues related to prayer. Some claim, however, that sharing in religious experience and the influence it has on the interior life can provide a spiritual basis for a more profound dialogue on the personal, intellectual and social levels.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.2.6 Other Forms of Dialogue: Cultural, Official, and Interior

As well as the four kinds of dialogue categorised by the CEP and PCID, other forms can be detected. For instance, an intriguing dialogue can be seen in the work of several Christians through their conscious interaction with Buddhist culture. Sawai Chinnawong is an artist from Thailand involved in such a dialogue. He seeks to paint Christian symbols and gospel themes using traditional Buddhist artistic influences, which he has studied in depth.<sup>50</sup> The Japanese theologian, Masao Takenaka, also

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<sup>47</sup> Chewn Jiuan A. Lee, "Beyond Words and Logic," in *Spirituality in Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Tosh Arai and Wesley Ariarajah (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 42-44.

<sup>48</sup> See Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology*, 247; Anthony Fernando, "Dialogue with Buddhism: Liberation as the Principal Point of Contact," in *Evangelization, Dialogue and Development. Selected Papers of the International Theological Conference, Nagpur (India) 1971*, ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1972), 288-290.

<sup>49</sup> See William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995; Fount Paperbacks, 1996), 133-135, 355-356; Yves Raguin, "Deepening our Understanding of Spirituality," in *Spirituality in Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Tosh Arai and Wesley Ariarajah (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 86.

<sup>50</sup> A brief introduction to Sawai Chinnawong's work and a reproduction of one of his paintings can be found in Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady, eds., *The Bible Through Asian Eyes* (Auckland: Pace Publishing in association with the Asian Christian Art Association, 1991), 166-167.

relates to Buddhist culture in his reflections on the person of Jesus through the Buddhist values of simplicity, beauty and humility found in the Zen tea ceremony.<sup>51</sup> Mahayana Buddhist values, such as self-negation and the practice of mercy, can be found in the novels of another Japanese, the writer Shusako Endo, who tries in his work to overcome the foreign appearance of Christianity to the Japanese people. In his book *Deep River*, for example, Endo tells the story of a young Japanese priest's search for a true Asian understanding of Jesus. He only finds this when he gives up trying to appropriate the Western theological doctrines of God and simply leads a life of poverty in service to the poor in India.<sup>52</sup> Among artists, writers, and those concerned with the aesthetic dimensions of culture, then, another dimension to dialogue with Buddhism can be discerned that expresses its theological significance more through image and story than rational argument.

Marcello Zago lists two other kinds of interreligious dialogue: official and interior dialogue.<sup>53</sup> Official dialogue is that sponsored by church bodies, usually between religious leaders. In relation to Buddhism, the PCID has organised meetings at monasteries in Taiwan (1995) and India (1998) between leading Buddhists and Christians to discuss issues related to theology and spirituality.<sup>54</sup> The World Council of Churches has also organised meetings with Buddhists.<sup>55</sup> As well as these bodies, Asian based organisations have developed a concern for dialogue. On the Protestant side the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has taken a leading role. For example, at their Asia Mission Conference 1994 in Seoul two Buddhists were invited to give papers.<sup>56</sup> The FABC through its Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) has also built up relationships with Buddhists. Indeed the first statement of BIRA related to dialogue with Buddhists, encouraging the bishops to take far-reaching measures to promote contacts between Christians and Buddhists at all levels in the

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<sup>51</sup> Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 70-83.

<sup>52</sup> Shusako Endo, *Deep River*, trans. Van C. Gessel (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1994).

<sup>53</sup> Marcello Zago, "Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," *IBMR* 22, no. 3 (1998): 100-101.

<sup>54</sup> Donald W. Mitchell, "The Making of a Joint Buddhist-Catholic Statement," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 16 (1996): 203-208; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Second International Colloquium of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID): Word and Silence in Buddhist and Christian Traditions," *Theology in Context* 16, no. 1 (1999): 141-143.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see World Council of Churches sub-unit on Dialogue, "Buddhists and Christians in the Search for Peace with Justice," *Current Dialogue* 15 (1988): 14-15. The WCC also invite Buddhist observers to large gatherings; for example, see Sulak Sivaraksa, "Vancouver: A Buddhist Perspective," *Current Dialogue* (Spring 1994): 9.

<sup>56</sup> Pandith Madampagama Assaji Thero, "Namao Buddhayo: Buddhist Philosophical Guidance for United Action Under Multifarious Conditions in Asia," and Yasuo Katsuyama, "A Buddhist Perspective on 'Called to Witness Together Amidst Asian Plurality'," in *Turn Around: Called to Witness Together Amidst Asian Plurality*, CCA Mission Conference (Hong Kong: CCA, 1995), 137-138 and 140-143 respectively.



Catholic Church.<sup>57</sup> Several small Christian study centres have also a significant role to play in the promotion of dialogue. These include the 'National Council of Churches' Center for the Study of Japanese Religions' in Kyoto, the 'Centre for Society and Religion' in Colombo, and the recently opened 'Institute of Religion and Culture' at the Payap seminary of the Church of Christ in Thailand in Chiang Mai. A wide range of dialogue initiatives relating to religious experience, theological reflection, and practical exposure to Buddhism takes place in these centres. A few Christian journals published in English also contribute to Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Asia and offer the wider world a glimpse into what is happening in various countries in the field. These include the Sri Lankan journal *Dialogue*, from Japan the *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*, and *Buddhist-Christian Studies* published in Hawaii.

Another form of dialogue, beginning to receive greater attention, is that of an interior dialogue taking place within Christians who have been raised in a Buddhist context. In relation to this some theologians have spoken of a deep, often unconscious influence that Buddhism exerts upon Christians. Masatoshi Doi, for example, claims that Buddhist spirituality is so ingrained in the Japanese psyche that at critical moments of danger in life Christians can often be heard calling out to "the name of the Buddha instead of the name of Christ."<sup>58</sup> Adams pointed to a largely unrecognised Buddhist influence upon Christians in Taiwan. He claimed that the concern for unity in the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan overrode serious theological differences within the church because of the anti-dogmatic influence of Buddhism in Taiwanese culture, which places more importance on human relationships than on dogma.<sup>59</sup> In a more self-conscious vein, a Catholic Bishop in Northern Thailand wrote, "I feel in my bones a cross culture of Buddhism and Christianity, which helps me to understand in a sympathetic way both Buddhists and Christians."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Chung Hyun Kyung speaks of being a product of Shamanism, which she says is in her bowels; Buddhism, which resides in her heart; and Christianity, which is in her head.<sup>61</sup> These are all examples of a profound Buddhist influence working in the lives of Asian Christians – a force that plays a part in shaping their theological outlook. This may often go unrecognised in the daily life of Christians but it suggests that

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<sup>57</sup> Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 109-112.

<sup>58</sup> Masatoshi Doi, "On Interfaith Dialogue: Some Important Aspects," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984): 27.

<sup>59</sup> Adams, *Cross-Cultural Theology*, 69-70.

<sup>60</sup> Ratna Bamrungtrakul, "Dialogue at the Level of Experience in Thailand," *Ecclesia Catholica/Secretarius Pro Non-Christianis Bulletin* 21, no. 6 (1986): 32.

<sup>61</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Gentle but Radical* (Videocassette, Produced by Kilimann Production, Essen, Germany. 32 min. 45 sec. Geneva: WCC Visual Arts Section, 1991 [?]).

they cannot ignore the reality of Buddhism even if they so desired. Some Asian theologians then express “an existential need”<sup>62</sup> to dialogue with Buddhism in order to make better sense of their Christian faith in the light of their Buddhist formation. Such an interior dialogue is not only limited to Christian intellectuals. Zago points out that the concern to understand religious identity is as much a question to Christians living in remote rural settings in Asia as it is to learned theologians used to the discipline of reflection.<sup>63</sup> This area of dialogue, however, remains a relatively new one in theological reflection that requires to be explored in more depth.

### 2.2.7 An Integral Approach

People and organisations involved in dialogue do not of course limit themselves to engagement in only one form of dialogue. At times they may be involved simultaneously in various forms. Chung Hyun Kyung is an example of a Christian who has engaged in an integral approach to dialogue. Though a university professor, she lives her theological interest in Buddhism through personal friendship with a Buddhist monk with whom she meditates and shares in discussion. Also, in her support of those working for justice with the ‘minjung’ (the poor in Korean society) and in her involvement in feminist issues in Korean society, Buddhism is a constant dialogue partner and inspiration.<sup>64</sup> Culturally, as referred to earlier, she is aware of being interiorly formed by Buddhism, and so pursues ways of expressing her Christian faith using Buddhist images and thought.

Another figure who entered into a holistic encounter with Buddhism was the Catholic priest Michael Rodrigo of Sri Lanka. He set up a small Christian community in the midst of a poor Buddhist village. The village and surrounding area had been greatly oppressed in the past by the British colonial powers so Rodrigo, conscious of the way in which Christianity was identified with colonialism, established his community as a sign and act of reconciliation. As well as forming close relationships with local Buddhist monks and participating in Buddhist festivals and meditation, he engaged in basic rural and cultural development projects. Immersion in the lives of the poor and an attitude of humility to learn from the Buddhist monks, he argued, was the best basis for a profound theological dialogue

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<sup>62</sup> Jan Van Bragt, “Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism,” *BNIRC* no. 21 (1997): 10.

<sup>63</sup> Marcello Zago, “Evangelization in the Religious Situation of Asia,” in *Evangelization in the World Today*, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies, ed. Norbert Greinacher and Alois Müller (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 76.

<sup>64</sup> Chung, *Gentle but Radical*, Video.

with the liberative teachings and traditions within Buddhism. His concern for social justice for the poor and the complex political situation in Sri Lanka led to his assassination at the hands of political extremists in 1988.<sup>65</sup> These two brief examples, though uncommon, point to a richness of encounter in Asia where Buddhist-Christian dialogue can be seen to affect most aspects of daily life and religious commitment.

### 2.2.8 Barriers to Overcome

Despite all the above examples of Christians in dialogue with Buddhism misconceptions of each other's tradition persist and there is a reluctance to learn from each other. This was clearly evident in the furore that surrounded the Pope's visit to Sri Lanka in 1995, boycotted by many Buddhists. In a book, published before the visit, the Pope spoke freely on a number of issues and gave his opinion about Buddhism. He described its soteriology in negative terms, saying that Buddhism viewed the world as the source of suffering and evil from which humankind needed to escape. There was a public outcry in Sri Lanka over these remarks, and elsewhere across the Buddhist world, with Buddhists rejecting the Pope's views as a misinterpretation and hurtful caricature of their religion.<sup>66</sup> That the head of the world's largest Christian church could appear to misread basic Buddhist teachings so easily, and publicly, suggests that there is still a long way to go in the development of mutual understanding.

An in-depth dialogue with Buddhism, it has to be said, only takes place on the fringes of the church in Asia. Within the minority Christian population only a small number are involved in dialogue, with more Catholic than Protestant participants. Apart from numerical weakness, Christians desirous of dialogue face several other barriers that need to be overcome. For instance, Buddhists are in many places not interested in an active dialogue with Christians. This may be because they perceive Christianity as a militant missionary religion and are therefore suspicious of

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Rodrigo, "The Hope of Liberation Lessens Man's Inhumanity: A Contribution to Dialogue at Village Level," *CTC Bulletin* 7, no. 3 (1987): 14-31. See also Sr. Milburga Fernando, ed., *Harvest Dreams of Fr. Mike: Coming to Fruition* (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1998); Christian Workers Fellowship, *Fr. Michael Rodrigo: Prophet, Priest and Martyr*, A CWF Pamphlet (Colombo: CWF, 1989).

<sup>66</sup> For the text of the Pope's comments and various Christian and Buddhist responses to it see the entire issue of *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995) given over to the matter. Buddhists are also not immune, however, to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Christianity. See the Christian critique of a Buddhist's view of Christianity in Aloysius Pieris, "God-Talk and God-Experience in a Christian Perspective: A Response to Dr. Dharmasiri's Criticism of Christian Mysticism and the Christian Doctrinal Framework," *Dialogue* n.s. 2, no. 3 (1975): 116-128.

Christian motives for dialogue. It may also be that they do not perceive any real need for dialogue, as they feel secure in their own tradition and understanding it gives them of the place of other religions. A Thai theologian, Baw Tananone, pointed to a further difficulty for Asian Christians. He explained that interested Buddhists would prefer to dialogue with a Westerner rather than a Thai Christian. The Thai Christian is considered to have relinquished the Thai (Buddhist) cultural tradition in becoming Christian, and is therefore viewed with suspicion, whereas the Westerner is seen as representing a genuine, if foreign, tradition.<sup>67</sup> He also points out, though, that Thai Christians have not taken Buddhism seriously and so are not looked upon as worthwhile dialogue partners by Buddhists. Another problem is related to Christian theology in Asia, which is still largely dependent on the West for its content and method. Due to this, students and ministers are poorly equipped to understand and engage with the different outlook and expressions of Asian Buddhism. It can be difficult, therefore, to encourage an in-depth dialogue in mainstream theological circles in Asia and in the churches. Stanley Samartha points to yet one more barrier to dialogue sensed by Asian theologians and created by mainly non-Asian church leaders. He argues that in the World Council of Churches and the Vatican in recent years there has been a return to a more traditional theology of mission based on church expansion. At the same time Asian theologians involved in in-depth interreligious dialogue are looked upon with suspicion by influential groups within these bodies.<sup>68</sup>

In summary, it has been shown that the Asian Christian dialogue with Buddhism has a long history, with the outstanding example of the Nestorians in China. This early dialogue appears remarkably positive given the hostility between Christians and Buddhists over recent centuries. The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a renewed flowering of dialogue, a dialogue of many forms, which has built on Nestorian achievements. However, as discussed above, there are great barriers to overcome both within and between the two religions. In general, the promotion of interreligious dialogue in church and theological circles has had an immense influence on the understanding of Christian mission and theology over the last decades.<sup>69</sup> Time will tell if the dialogue with Buddhism in Asia will have a similarly profound and widespread effect on Asian theology.

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<sup>67</sup> Tananone, "A Call for Solidarity," 233.

<sup>68</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 172-173.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Haight, "The Church as Locus of Theology," in *Why Theology?* Concilium 1994/6, ed. Claude Geffré and Werner Jeanrond (London: SCM Press, 1994), 18-20; David J. Bosch,

## 2.3 Conclusion to Part I: Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in the Countries of the Three Theologians

The three Christian theologians at the centre of this thesis have all been brought up in cultures that have been deeply influenced by Buddhism. Buddhism arrived in Japan, Kosuke Koyama's homeland, from Korea in the sixth century and was promoted by the famous regent Prince Shotoku (574-622). The Mahayana tradition was favoured and it is here that the greatest variety of Mahayana schools continues to be found and where Buddhist-inspired new religious movements have prospered.<sup>70</sup> Buddhism has had to co-exist with Shintoism and Confucian values throughout Japan's history, but it continues to exert influence on the Japanese mind and society.<sup>71</sup> It is difficult to give a precise date for Buddhism's arrival in Thailand, where Koyama spent eight years working, though the Theravada tradition came to dominate from the thirteenth century onwards. Along with the King and the military, Buddhism is seen as one of the three traditional pillars of Thai society where over ninety percent of the people are Buddhist. Aloysius Pieris comes from Sri Lanka where the dominant Buddhism tradition is Theravada, which is adhered to by the majority ethnic Sinhalese people on the island. According to Sinhalese tradition, Mahinda, the son of Emperor Asoka, brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. It has survived varying fortunes throughout history and is today a central factor that shapes Sinhalese cultural and political identity.<sup>72</sup> Taiwan, the birthplace of Choan-Seng Song, came under the influence of Mahayana Buddhism from China before the Dutch colonists arrived in 1624, especially from Zen and Pure Land schools. Like other East Asians, the Taiwanese adopt an eclectic approach to religion and have often mixed elements of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and folk traditions together. Buddhist beliefs, though, have deeply influenced the people and, as already noted, there has been a great increase in the number of young people taking up Buddhist practice and a remarkable growth in Buddhist movements with a

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*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 474-489.

<sup>70</sup> An introduction to the Mahayana schools of Japan can be found in Shinshō Hanayama, "Buddhism of the One Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna)," in *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West Centre Press, University of Hawaii, 1967), 33-51. An introduction to New Religions in Japan is given by Ching, "East Asian Religions," 453-460.

<sup>71</sup> For evidence of Buddhist influence on the Japanese mind see Hideo Kishimoto, "Some Japanese Cultural Traits and Religions," in *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West Centre Press, University of Hawaii, 1967), 110-121.

<sup>72</sup> An overview of the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its significance in forming Sinhalese national identity is given by Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 137-210.



strong social welfare commitment.<sup>73</sup> With a personal awareness and appreciation of Buddhism's influence upon Asian peoples, Koyama, Song and Pieris have each in their own fashion sought to enter into dialogue with Buddhism.

In the countries from which the three theologians come and with which they are associated Christians make up only a small minority of the population,<sup>74</sup> and only a small number of them are involved in an in-depth dialogue with Buddhism. In today's Japan, for the most part, Christian involvement in dialogue is characterised by a philosophical concern, especially an engagement with Zen thought.<sup>75</sup> There is also a keen interest among some Christians in meditation practice, again focussing mainly on Zen. In Thailand, Catholics have been more involved in an in-depth dialogue with Buddhists than Protestant Christians. The mainline Protestant church in Thailand for which Koyama worked, the Church of Christ in Thailand, operates for the most part with an exclusivist theology of religions inherited from American Presbyterian missionaries; interreligious dialogue is discouraged.<sup>76</sup> Much of the in-depth dialogue that does take place in Thailand revolves around rural and social development programmes.<sup>77</sup> In Sri Lanka, dialogue with Buddhism has been carried out on many levels, as examples in this chapter show.<sup>78</sup> Yet only a minority of radical Christians have been seriously involved in dialogue and in recent years the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, of which Pieris is a member, has shown less support for dialogue and more concern for a traditional model of mission based on evangelism and church expansion.<sup>79</sup> In Taiwan, there is an increasing desire among some Christians to enter into dialogue with a rejuvenated Buddhism. Yet, for the

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<sup>73</sup> An overview of Buddhist history in Taiwan is given by Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*. Jones pays particular attention to the rise of Buddhist social welfare movements like Fo Kuang Shan, pp. 185-198, and the BCRTCA, pp. 198-217, that have made a great impact on Taiwanese society. He reports that one in ten of Taiwanese people belongs to the BCRTCA.

<sup>74</sup> According to Brierley and Wraight, Christians make up the following percentage figures of population: Japan, 0.9%; Thailand, 0.8%; Sri Lanka, 6%; Taiwan, 5%; Brierley and Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity*, 105-109.

<sup>75</sup> For an overview of several Japanese theologians engaged in interreligious dialogue and the significance of Zen thought in their theology see Masaya Odagaki, "Theology after 1970," in *A History of Japanese Theology*, ed. Yasuo Furuya (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 113-140. The thought of the Zen philosopher, Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), and the Kyoto school of philosophy he founded, which engaged with Western philosophical traditions, has been greatly influential among Christian theologians and Buddhists in Japan involved in dialogue. See *idem*, 115-116.

<sup>76</sup> Swanson, *Krischak Muang Nua*, 164.

<sup>77</sup> Seri Phongphit, "The Impact of Interreligious Encounter in Thailand," *Inter-Religio* 5 (1984): 16-21.

<sup>78</sup> For an overview of Sri Lankan Christians and Christian organisations involved in Christian-Buddhist dialogue see Ulrich Dornberg, "Searching Through the Crisis: Christians, Contextual Theology and Social Change in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s," *Logos* 31, nos. 2 & 3 (1992): 133-167.

<sup>79</sup> Iddamalagoda, "Interfaith Dialogue," 316-334.

most part, the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, from which Song comes, has taken a negative view of Taiwanese traditional culture and religions; relatively few Protestant Christians are engaged in an in-depth dialogue on the island.<sup>80</sup> The great growth of interest in Buddhist practice among Taiwanese people in recent years is viewed, by Christians involved in dialogue, as presenting challenges to the church particularly in the areas of interior spiritual development and building a sense of community and peace in society.<sup>81</sup>

In summary, then, the three theologians come from cultures and have work experience in countries that have been heavily influenced by Buddhism. In each of these countries dialogue between Christians and Buddhists is going on, but is only actively pursued by a minority of church members. The three theologians, therefore, are among a small group of pioneering Asian Christian theologians at the forefront of modern day Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Asia.

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<sup>80</sup> See Huang Po Ho, "Christians in Taiwan: Oppressed Majority and Alienated Minority," in *People of God, Peoples of God: A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Asia*, ed. Hans Ucko (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 13-17.

<sup>81</sup> For example, see Vermander, "Christianity and the Taiwanese Religious Landscape," 138-139.

## **Part II**

### **The Theologies of Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris in Dialogue with Buddhism**

## Chapter 3

# Kosuke Koyama

### 3.1 Introduction

#### 3.1.1 The Work of Kosuke Koyama

The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, is recognised internationally as one of Asia's leading and most creative Christian thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Now retired and living in the United States, Koyama has throughout his life shown a committed concern for the development of Christian theology in Asia. His theological work as an educator and writer has contributed greatly in this area.<sup>2</sup>

From the personal reflections that occupy a central place in his writings it can be seen that Koyama has led a theologically rich and varied life. He was born in 1929 into a second generation Christian family in Tokyo and baptised during the Second World War. Barely surviving the saturation bombing of the city, he then witnessed the fall of Japanese Imperial rule. After the war he studied theology in Tokyo and went on to complete further studies, including his doctorate, in the United States. In 1960 he went to Northern Thailand as a missionary of the United Church of Japan (*Kyodan*), where he taught theology at McGilvery Theological Seminary of the Church of Christ in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> In 1968 he moved to Singapore to become dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST) and executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia (ATSSEA). 1974 saw him move again, this time to take up a lecturing post at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. Six years later he was invited to join the staff of Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he taught until his retirement in 1997. He is presently 'John D. Rockefeller Jr. Emeritus Professor of Ecumenical Studies' at Union. This brief introduction shows that he has lived through many upheavals both

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<sup>1</sup> For international appreciation of Koyama's work see the Festschrift by Dale T. Irvin and Akintunde E. Akinade, eds., *The Agitated Mind of God: The Theology of Kosuke Koyama* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Details of books and articles written by Koyama, and of C. S. Song and Aloysius Pieris, are provided in the main bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Before going to Thailand Koyama married an American woman, Lois Rozendall.

in terms of world history and his own personal life. He has survived the destruction of war, had experience of many Asian cultures, witnessed the rapid social and economic changes that have engulfed Asia, and sought to bridge the theological and cultural differences between East and West. All of this is reflected upon in his theological writing.<sup>4</sup>

Koyama has written several books and contributed many articles to books and various journals. His work displays a broad range of interest, written in an ecumenical spirit.<sup>5</sup> He first came to prominence with the publication of *Waterbuffalo Theology* (1974), which sought to relate Christian faith to the Thai context. Contextualisation of theology has remained at the centre of his life's work. As his context and that of the world has changed, so too has his writing sought to reflect on new realities. Asian cultures, the effects of technology, global militarism, Bible translation, and Asian-American issues are just a few of the topics that he has covered in his work. The unusual style and method of his writing has often been noted. Much use is made of image and metaphor, especially in the many short meditations on various themes that make up much of his work.<sup>6</sup> He often throws up questions for the reader, leaving matters open ended and inconclusive. Diverse stories from world events and everyday life are intersected with biblical texts. Recently he described the kind of theology that he seeks to convey as "picture theology," where he attempts to reproduce the simplicity of language and vivid imagery used by Jesus in order to communicate with the widest audience.<sup>7</sup> Such an unconventional style in theological circles frustrates some readers. A fellow Asian complained that it "suffers from lack of depth" and is not systematic enough.<sup>8</sup> Most observers, however, appreciate that Koyama has pioneered a different style of theology from that common in the West, but one that is no less intellectually rigorous or theologically profound. Thus, C. J. Arévalo, S.J. commented, "Perhaps Koyama will not mind our saying that he often walks the way of the fathers."<sup>9</sup> Given this kind

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<sup>4</sup> For more detailed biographical information see: Kosuke Koyama, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *IBMR* 21, no. 2 (1997): 55-59; Merrill Morse, *Kosuke Koyama: A Model for Intercultural Theology*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 15-36.

<sup>5</sup> Koyama has worked for several ecumenical churches and organisations such as *Kyodan*, the Church of Christ in Thailand, ATSSEA, and the World Council of Churches.

<sup>6</sup> Two books represent his most substantial works in terms of length and sustained theological reflection: *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1974); and *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Towards Human Picture Theology," *Asia Journal of Theology (AJT)* 13, no. 2 (1999): 248.

<sup>8</sup> Jung Young Lee, review of *Three Mile an Hour God*, by Kosuke Koyama, *IBMR* 5, no. 2 (1981): 88.

<sup>9</sup> C. J. Arévalo, review of *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology*, by Kosuke Koyama, *IBMR* 10, no. 3 (1986): 141.



of praise the lack of recognition Koyama receives in Japan comes as a surprise. In a recent book on the history of theology in Japan he is mentioned only on the last page. This is partly because he has lived much of his life outside his native Japan and written primarily in English. But, as the editor of the book admits, this lack of acknowledgement is probably also because Japanese theologians have not taken contextual theology seriously enough;<sup>10</sup> something that Koyama has consciously engaged in for many years throughout South and East Asia.

### 3.1.2 The Dialogue with Buddhism: Scope and Motivating Factors

#### *The Encounter with Buddhist Thailand*

The writings of Koyama show that he has engaged with Buddhism in a variety of ways. He assesses the import of Buddhist teachings and Buddhist images upon the Asian mind, comparing and contrasting these with Christian doctrine. He recounts meetings with Theravada monks and laity, explaining how these have influenced his theological outlook. As a literary device he writes an imaginary letter to Buddhist and Christian figures of the past, in order to present a dialogue that has contemporary significance. On an existential level he reflects on his own cultural background shaped by Mahayana Buddhism. In a number of ways, then, he has entered into a profound dialogue with Buddhism.

He confessed that during theological studies in the United States he rejected his “Asian religious and cultural background as worthless.”<sup>11</sup> Later, on his arrival to Northern Thailand, he dismissed Buddhism, considering it to be “either undernourished or misguided”<sup>12</sup> and destined to die away. He recalled:

When I first went to Thailand, I had a rather negative view of Buddhism there. I felt that Buddhism did not have much of a future and was probably passing out of the thoughts of many millions in South East Asia. Since life had become increasingly modernized and secularized, that ancient religion of ‘detachment’ and ‘tranquillity’ was bound to diminish. So I did not pay much attention to it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Yasuo Furuya, ed., *A History of Japanese Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 146.

<sup>11</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Christ’s Homelessness,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 21 (1993): 702.

<sup>12</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 129.

Yet, three years later, his view of Buddhism had changed radically to become much more positive. He points to two important factors in this transformation: his growing ability to use Thai language, and friendships with Buddhists.<sup>14</sup> Study of the Thai language served as the catalyst that led him into a deeper relationship with Buddhism. He describes the significance of this through the imagery of baptism:

Learning the Thai language was my second spiritual baptism, a baptism into the unfamiliar sounds and symbols of a different culture and religion. Today I am tempted to say that anyone who wants to understand multiculturalism or religious pluralism would first have to endure this linguistic baptism.<sup>15</sup>

The process of learning Thai was a difficult and humbling experience for him, but it initiated a new orientation towards Buddhism and other Asian religions. Friendships with sincere Buddhists further challenged his former theological position. He began to relate to them primarily as fellow humans, with similar faults and spiritual aspirations, and not to prejudge them because of their Buddhist belief. Contact with Thai monks also made a deep impression:

I was shaken by the reality of Buddhist spirituality. I came to know the people who call themselves Buddhists 'with fragrance of the Buddha'. They live a life of piety, humility and dedication to the ideal given by the Buddha. Above all, their poverty and freedom they enjoy in being poor impressed me. . . . How is Buddhism capable of producing men of such spiritual beauty? I had thought it was a monopoly of Christians.<sup>16</sup>

Koyama was 'shaken' by Buddhism to reassess his theological stance towards Asian cultures and religions. He felt a contradiction between the theology of religions he had inherited from the West and his experience within a Buddhist context. After eight years in Thailand he wrote about this and revealed the way his theology was to develop. Commenting on a German theologian's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:17, who said that the wisdom of the cross stood against the wisdom of the world, Koyama countered:

Does all the wisdom of the world here include the wisdom of the Enlightened One who was undoubtedly one of the greatest souls the human race ever produced? Is Christ so categorically 'in conflict with' the Buddha? This may not be a disturbing puzzle if one is not living among the Buddhist people. But when he is surrounded by 30 million committed Buddhists, as in Thailand, it becomes profoundly a disturbing puzzle. This is a puzzle that springs out of the clash

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Koyama, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 56.

<sup>16</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 40.

between the theological and the empirical. Our experiences forces [sic] us to contradict what the theological says.<sup>17</sup>

Western theology appeared handicapped to Koyama when it came to theologising on Buddhism - it lacked the experiential dimension where it was confronted by the other's living spirituality and culture. Through his own experiential encounter with Theravada Buddhism his theological approach to other religions had been transformed. Such encounters, where the Christian is challenged by the unfamiliar beliefs and the sincere religious practice of others, were to become an important factor in the development of his theology. He considered Asian Christians to be uniquely placed in offering Christian theology the possibly of new insights through dialogue with the Asian multireligious context in which they lived. While not jettisoning all he had learned from Western theological education, he was forced to reassess its meaning and applicability in Asia in the light of his experience in Buddhist Thailand.

### ***Reflections on a Japanese Upbringing***

The exposure to Buddhism in Thailand led Koyama to reflect back on his Japanese upbringing. Despite being born into a Christian family, he understood that Buddhism had greatly influenced his life. A symbol of this influence was Prince Shotoku (574-622), who was largely responsible for the establishment of Buddhism in Japan and considered by many Japanese to have been a reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.<sup>18</sup> Koyama wrote, "No matter what I do, 'Prince Shotoku' is within me, just as Moses is found in every Jew."<sup>19</sup> He went on to borrow an image from Martin Buber, who reflected on the Jewish influence in his life using imagery from an old Jewish cemetery he was visiting. Koyama applied the cemetery image to himself:

The graveyard - consisting of crooked, cracked, shapeless, random stones - in which I find my identity would be that of Mahayana Buddhism. I am proud of this great tradition. Its memory reaches back to the Enlightenment of Gotama Buddha. Born in a land which has embraced Mahayana Buddhism for thirteen centuries, I am

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<sup>17</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "The Role of Theology in Asia Today," *Indian Journal of Theology* 17, Supplement (1968): 5.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of Prince Shotoku's life and the influence he exerted upon the Japanese national and cultural identity through the introduction of Buddhism see Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion: With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (London: Kegan Paul, 1930), 57-65.

<sup>19</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 6-7. This book contains Koyama's most detailed reflections on the influence of Mahayana Buddhism upon his life.

invited to achieve Enlightenment in emulation of this great son of Asia.<sup>20</sup>

This 'graveyard' for Koyama "signifies a sacred memory" not to be scorned but appreciated.<sup>21</sup> So he set out on an inner dialogue between his Buddhist influenced mind and Christian faith. He saw this process as necessary not only to comprehend the religious value of Buddhism but also in order to work out his Christian identity more fully. He asked, "How can I appreciate the thought world of Mount Sinai without bringing it into a dialogue with the culture world native to myself?"<sup>22</sup> Here he is a witness to the reality of cross-religious identity felt by many Asian Christians. His counsel is not to deny or reject this reality, but to recognise it as opening up the possibility for creative dialogue and a deeper awareness of what it means to be Christian within Asia.

Another motivating factor in Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism can be seen in his mention of gratitude for the help his family received from Buddhists. At the age of five his father died of pneumonia in a Buddhist run hospital. A Buddhist taxi driver brought his father's body back home. Koyama reflected:

He breathed his last in the name of Christ on a bed provided by the generosity of Japanese Buddhists. I am grateful for the help he received from this hospital. My mother wrapped the body in a blanket and brought him home in a taxi. For the driver it must have been inauspicious to carry a dead body which would pollute his cab. I am always grateful to this unknown taxi driver who helped the poor widow. My father died a Christian accepting the kindness of Buddhists.<sup>23</sup>

Both in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, then, he had found examples of compassionate action that impressed him and encouraged him to enter into dialogue.

It was the witness of Buddhism itself, then, that inspired Koyama's desire for dialogue. He was impressed by the Theravada tradition's pervasive influence on Thai culture and the vitality of religious life in Buddhism. This led him to reassess his Mahayana Buddhist background, and through the interior dialogue that ensued he revealed the depth to which Buddhism confronts many Asian Christians: dialogue with Buddhism lies at the core of their being.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

## 3.2 Theology and the Dialogue with Buddhism

### 3.2.1 God's Passionate Love

#### *Theology of the Cross*

Permeating and dominating Koyama's theology is his understanding that God, out of love, is passionately involved in the world. Many images and metaphors are employed to express this in his work. For example, the biblical image of the 'agitated' God in Hosea 11.8 is often used to convey the sense of God's active concern for humanity.<sup>24</sup> But it is the life and ministry of Jesus, especially his death on the cross, that reveals the true extent and depth of God's love. The cross is the ultimate expression of God's passionate concern for the world. A theology of the cross, then, is the key theme in Koyama's theology that shapes and judges all others found in his work.

Jesus, the embodiment of God's love, is portrayed as the one "who has gone to the utter periphery."<sup>25</sup> The periphery in Koyama's writing is a symbol for the life of Jesus based on radical self-denial and self-giving. Jesus is shown to have gone to the social periphery inhabited by the poor and outcasts, and to the theological periphery where he condemns all pretence of theological self-righteousness. Such self-denial is seen most clearly in the cross, which reveals the paradox of Christian religion: "Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, affirms his lordship by being crucified."<sup>26</sup> Koyama exhorts Christians to do as Christ has done in being prepared to go to the peripheries of society in self-giving love, especially to the poor and marginalised. He called on the church to live with a "crucified mind,"<sup>27</sup> an attitude of humility and service without thought of reward or pretence of superiority. This same attitude shapes his approach to doing theology, where he is fond of quoting Luther: "Not study, reading or speculation but living, being killed and damned will make a theologian."<sup>28</sup>

A theology of the cross has formed the core of Koyama's thought since the beginning of his writing in the 1960s. He stresses that this theology is not meant

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Kosuke Koyama, "The Asian Approach to Christ," *Missiology: An International Review* 12, no. 4 (1984): 438; idem, "New Heaven and New Earth: Theological Education for the New Millennium," *AJT* 12, no. 1 (1998): 10. For other biblical images see Kosuke Koyama, "The Hand Painfully Open," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1987): 33-43.

<sup>25</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Jesus Christ Who Has Gone to the Utter Periphery," *ER* 43, no. 1 (1991): 100.

<sup>26</sup> Koyama, "The Asian Approach to Christ," 445-446.

<sup>27</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Reflections on the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia," *South East Asia Journal of Theology (SEAJT)* 15, no. 2 (1974): 14. Koyama uses this quote in several other of his writings.



simply to convince individuals of their personal sin and need for repentance but has a strong social and ethical message. "The primary duty of *theologia crucis*," he wrote, "is to confront violence and destroy it."<sup>29</sup> This ethical focus and the humility that underpins it is further emphasised and argued to be of social relevance in his thoughts on the person of Christ. Recently he wrote:

At the centre of my Christology is the idea that Jesus Christ is the one who has done justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with God. I am not quite sure whether this would satisfy the intention of the classical Christological definitions, but I would guess that such an expression would be more communicating to *today's* world of 5,000 million people with 7,000 languages and dialects upon this planet.<sup>30</sup>

The passionate love of God for humanity, then, finds its ultimate expression in Jesus' life and, especially, in his crucifixion. It is a love that is ethically orientated against social injustice and based in humility.

From Koyama's writings it is possible to observe several factors that have influenced the development of his key theological theme. His belief in God's presence in concrete human suffering has been shaped, for example, by personal experience in living through the destruction of war in Asia, coming into contact with the plight of Asia's rural and urban poor, and through his awareness of the injustices perpetuated upon Jewish and black people.<sup>31</sup> The lives and teachings of people like Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Kazoh Kitamori, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King have also made an impression.<sup>32</sup> Then there are particular events in his Christian life. For example, he states that the minister who baptised him, as a 12 year old in war-torn Japan, made a great impression on him when he said that God also cared for Americans. This introduced Koyama to the universal nature of God's love, which became a central feature of his theology.<sup>33</sup> All of the above have helped to mould his understanding of God's passionate love for the world.

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<sup>29</sup> Koyama, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 59.

<sup>30</sup> Koyama, "New Heaven," 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> For reference to Koyama's exposure to the suffering of black people and Jewish people, and other oppressed groups, see Koyama, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 55-59.

<sup>32</sup> For reference to Francis of Assisi see, *Ibid.*, 55. Koyama's doctoral studies were on Martin Luther's exposition of the penitential Psalms. Luther's influence can be seen in Kosuke Koyama, "Imitatio Christi in Luther's Theology of Faith," *Indian Journal of Theology* 12 (1963): 59-65. For Kitamori reference see, Kosuke Koyama, review of *Theology of the Pain of God*, by Kazoh Kitamori, *Asia Focus* 4, no. 2 (1969): 65-72. For reference to Gandhi and Martin Luther King see for example, Kosuke Koyama, "Interplay with Other Religions," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), 559.

<sup>33</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Father, Forgive...", *ER* 47, no. 3 (1995): 271-272.

## ***Buddhist Self-denial***

As explained above, at the centre of Koyama's theology of the cross is the love of Jesus, a love that is most evident in Jesus' interior attitude of humility and life of self-giving. Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism led him to recognise a similarity with Christianity in this area: a "spiritual correspondence" in the practice of self-denial.<sup>34</sup> Merrill Morse commented, "It was Koyama's encounter with Buddhism . . . that contributed to his theology of self denial."<sup>35</sup> It encouraged Koyama to reflect anew on the nature of Christian discipleship, mission and doctrine.

The significance and challenge of Buddhist self-denial to Koyama comes across in a story he told of his conversation with a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk while driving in Singapore. He recalled:

The streets were, as usual, jammed with traffic and the fumes were unbearable. The monk, reading from a huge church poster 'Crusade for Christ', turned and whispered to me: 'Your Christ must be desperate. He needs his people to crusade for him. Why do you Christians campaign for Christ? Campaigning is a political exercise, and certainly not a religious activity.' After a few minutes of silence he continued; 'Self-denial is the religious activity. Why do you cheapen and humiliate your saviour?'<sup>36</sup>

These words caused Koyama to reflect on the Buddhist monk as a symbol of self-denial, contrasting the shaven eyebrows of the monk - a sign of detachment - with the materialism symbolised by the multi-million dollar cosmetic industry. The monk stood as a "self-denier" in a world dominated by selfish pursuit.<sup>37</sup> Koyama then commented:

For the Buddhists the story of renunciation is inseparable from the story of enlightenment. This confession of the monk has been meaningful for my theological life.<sup>38</sup>

This brief personal encounter with the monk became the catalyst for Koyama's further theological reflection and development.

The 'meaningful confession' of the monk pointed to an important emphasis in the Buddhist religion, discerned by Koyama: knowledge and practice are understood as interdependent realities. He explained:

The central idea to which all the branches of Buddhism give deep spiritual and intellectual devotion is that of the inseparable

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<sup>34</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Morse, *Kosuke Koyama*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

unity of *wisdom* and *mercy*. The Buddhist wisdom is not a 'philosophy' as the West would define it. It is a 'path'. Walking on this path must be accompanied by doing the acts of mercy. They are inseparable. Self-denial roots itself in this unity of wisdom and mercy. This unity necessarily expresses itself as an act of self-denial. The motivation to self-denial is found at the very centre of the Buddhist way of life.<sup>39</sup>

The monk's confession then led him on to a critique of Western society and Christian missionaries. He noted that Western society had separated religious faith and practice, which resulted in a loss of motivation for a life of self-denial in its pursuit of individual and material fulfilment. The New Testament witness, he claimed, stood in stark contrast to this separation and also to the crusade mentality found among missionaries. "The mark of self-denial," he wrote, "is the fundamental qualification for being an evangelist. Religious commitment can be communicated only through the sign of *stigma*."<sup>40</sup> It is a sign he believed was more evident in Buddhist than in Christian practice:

Often I was bothered by a contrast between the security-minded and budget-minded Protestant missionaries and the orange-robed Buddhist monks in Thailand. In their spirituality the monks appeared closer to the image of the stigma of Christ than the Christian missionaries! Is such a thing possible!<sup>41</sup>

Koyama also found an emphasis on self-denial within Mahayana Buddhism. In several places he refers to the *bodhisattva*, who he considered similar to Christ in giving up any concern for personal salvation so as to help others in pain and distress. Buddhists, remarked Koyama, are called to "imitate the self-giving and self-denying *bodhisattvas*."<sup>42</sup> He was also impressed by the 'Seventeen Article Constitution' (604 CE) of Japan attributed to Prince Shotoku, writing:

The constitution does not aspire to organize a nation ruled by laws and institutions. It rather aims to achieve a moral state through appealing to universal morality and religion of Buddhism. The value of Buddhism implicit in the constitution is, according to Inoue Mitsusada, the doctrine of 'self-denial'. Is not this an unusual constitution!<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>43</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 153. This was the first constitution in Japan to be based on Buddhist principles. For an English translation see, Richard Hooker "Ancient Japan: The Japanese Constitution," in *World Civilizations: An Internet Classroom and Anthology*, Washington State University [Source: W. G. Aston, trans., Nihongi: *Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D.*

Koyama singled out for particular attention the words of the constitution, “We are not unquestionably sages, nor are they unquestionably fools.”<sup>44</sup> These words are understood to convey a sense of humility before the ultimate truth and a respect for people’s differing religious views. This guarded against the kind of boastful claims of religious superiority that he had found prevalent among Christian missionaries. He also referred to another famous saying of Shotoku that reflects a certain humility, “*Seken Koke, Yuibutsu Zeshin*” - ‘This world is empty and passing away. Only the world of the Buddha is true.’<sup>45</sup> This is seen to reflect an attitude of Buddhist non-attachment to religious doctrines, which are considered as fallible human constructs that should not be ascribed an absolute value. A similar humble attitude towards doctrine, claimed Koyama, is found in the Theravada monk’s rule, where it states that the monk should not falsely claim to know absolute truth. If the monk breaks this rule he can be derobed. Shotoku’s words and the monk’s rule, Koyama went on to claim, correspond to the biblical command not to take God’s name in vain, which cautions humility before the mystery of God.<sup>46</sup>

The Buddhist stress on self-denial, then, has impressed Koyama and left its mark on his theology. The confession of the monk not only served as a critique of Christian mission but, more importantly, spoke to Koyama of how religious truth in Buddhism is validated and communicated through the praxis of self-denial. This central role for self-denial is found in his theology of the cross, which is understood, first and foremost, as a revelation of God’s love embodied in humble service rather than as a doctrine of sacrificial atonement simply requiring the assent of faith. The saving power of the cross, for Koyama, is to be found in the practice of love it engenders. Similar to Shotoku’s ‘*Yuibutsu Zeshin*’ the cross reveals a mystery, of God’s love, which is beyond dogmatic formulation. Though Koyama is careful to say that the Buddhist and Christian praxis of self-denial is not identical, he does come to see that something approaching a theology of the cross is possible outwith Christianity. This, for him, points to the universality of God’s grace in Asian

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697, 2 vols. in 1 (London: Kegan and Co., 1896), vol. 2, 128-133] available from <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/CONST.HTM>; Internet; accessed 11 November 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 158. These words are contained in Article 10 of the constitution. Koyama does not provide a translation of the constitution so it may be useful here to quote more from Article 10 in order to appreciate the setting of Koyama’s chosen words: “Let us cease from wrath, and refrain from angry looks. Nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong. We are not unquestionably sages, nor are they unquestionably fools. Both of us are simply ordinary men. How can one lay down a rule by which to distinguish right from wrong? For we are all, one with another, wise and foolish, like a ring which has no end.” Richard Hooker “Ancient Japan: The Japanese Constitution,” Internet.

<sup>45</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 155-156.

religious traditions. While it is important to recognise several influencing factors contributing to his understanding of God's passion, the dialogue with Buddhism has been crucial in serving to reinforce and deepen the emphasis placed on self-denial in his theology.

### 3.2.2 Developing Contextual Theology

#### *The Waterbuffalo Theologian*

Koyama is perhaps best known as a theologian of contextualisation, constantly seeking to relate Christian faith to the cultural, religious and socio-economic realities of Asia. Early on he spoke of two essential elements to contextual theology: the need to develop "a relevant theology of religion" and "a theology of modernisation."<sup>47</sup> As a missionary in Thailand he sought to root the gospel in the life of the people:

I decided that my theology in northern Thailand must begin with the need of the farmers and not, for instance, the great thoughts developed in *Summa Theologiae* and *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*.<sup>48</sup>

This marked the beginnings of his 'waterbuffalo theology,' which sought to relate the gospel to the world of Thai farmers who ploughed their rice fields with waterbuffalo. This contextual concern continued throughout his work as a theological educator in the years to follow and came to include reflections on his Japanese cultural background.

Constant reference is made by Koyama to the Bible for insight into the relationship between gospel and culture. The incarnation of Christ presents the perfect model. His birth is perceived as an act of divine humility, *kenosis*, whereby he takes upon himself the confines of ancient Palestinian culture. It implies that salvation is communicated always and only within cultural contexts. However, Koyama asserted that Jesus and his message also stands above culture. "The gospel," he wrote, "displays its authentic power in its refusal to be completely indigenised."<sup>49</sup> Jesus, then, is inextricably related to every culture but not bound by any. With this understanding Koyama called attention to the urgent need for theological contextualisation in Asia and for Asian Christians to relate positively to their cultural inheritance. However, he is aware that not all culture is good, especially when it

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<sup>47</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Appetiser and Main Course," *Frontier* 12 (August 1969): 196.

<sup>48</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "From Water Buffaloes to Asian Theology," *International Review of Mission (IRM)* 53, no. 212 (1964): 458.

<sup>49</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "The Tradition and Indigenisation," *AJT* 7, no. 1 (1993): 7.



encompasses social and political realities. His wartime experiences in Japan made him aware of the power of imperial culture to blind and enslave an entire nation. He is also critical of the violence generated by Western culture through its responsibility for colonialism, war, religious intolerance and the ecological crisis. The task of the theologian, therefore, is not only to discover and affirm positive aspects of culture that reflect or enhance Christian faith, but also to seek the transformation of culture by unmasking violence and promoting gospel values. It is the crucified Christ and those who live by his example, he claimed, who have this power to transform.

Eight years working in Thailand provided Koyama with invaluable lessons in contextualisation. There he realised that Asians bring their own particular interpretation and insights to biblical texts that differ from the West. This occurred in a Bible study with Thais on Matthew 15: 21-28. Koyama had considered Luther's interpretation of the text to be the correct one, so was shocked to find the Thais unappreciative. Where Luther stressed the inner turmoil and faith of the woman seeking help for her daughter, the Thai perception highlighted her motherly concern. Family relationship, rather than inner turmoil, was most important to the Thai contextual understanding of the story.<sup>50</sup> The need for theology to grapple with Bible translation and communicating the gospel using conceptual thinking and cultural values from Asia's religious traditions was also impressed upon him. He foresaw too that Christian theology would be enriched when brought into dialogue with Asia's religious and cultural traditions. This dialogue, he argued, should include people involved in political movements for non-violence, social justice, and human rights.<sup>51</sup> Living as he has done in many different contexts, he views the contextualisation of the gospel as a never-ending program, with historical realities determining priorities. As societies change and globalisation begins to effect all aspects of life, Christian faith is presented with new challenges at every turn. He foresees, though, that new resources will appear as Christians from different continents share their theological insights, and awareness of the interdependence of peoples and their cultures continues to grow.

Koyama appreciates the plural nature of theology today and despairs at the continuing dominance of Western theology in Asia. He was critical of the scientific approach to theology and desire for academic respectability found in the West, as well as the failure of Asians to unlock their vernacular and cultural resources. "No group looks down on its own religious and cultural heritage more than Asian (and

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<sup>50</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Bangkok, Wittenberg and Jerusalem," *SEAJT* 10, no. 1 (1968): 3-5.

<sup>51</sup> Koyama, "The Tradition and Indigenisation," 10.

perhaps African) Christian theologians,” he complained.<sup>52</sup> The history of missions and estrangement of Asian Christians from their own cultures has, in his view, caused great damage. He wrote:

The Christian church has given an almost ineradicable impression among Asian peoples that it is incapable of appreciating whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious...(Phil. 4:8) in their own culture.<sup>53</sup>

There is, then, a long way to go before theology becomes truly Asian. However, he pointed beyond this regional need of contextual theology to emphasise the method applicable to all efforts in contextualisation: it is to be pursued by following Christ crucified, through a life of self-giving and self-denial. “Martyrdom,” he wrote, “is the ultimate contextualization.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***The Necessity of Dialogue for Communicating the Christian Faith to Buddhists***

The urgent need to inculturate Christian faith in a Buddhist environment became apparent to Koyama when he began teaching theology in Thailand. In one of his first lectures he opened with a quotation from the Bible and realised that the Thai words of scripture were loaded with Buddhist meaning.<sup>55</sup> A similar experience happened when he tried to teach Christian dogma. He wrote:

I had considerable difficult [*sic*] in communicating Luther’s idea of Justification by faith. How could I explain it through language so steeped in Buddhist culture? . . . This was the moment I personally experienced a “biological” connection, as it were, between religion and culture.<sup>56</sup>

Immersion in the Thai context taught him to see dialogue as a theological imperative.

For Christian faith to be more understandable to Thais, Koyama embarked on a process of reformulating Christian concepts using Buddhist terms. He saw this as a difficult task, requiring in-depth knowledge both of Buddhist and Christian thought. He highlighted two dangers: syncretism and the adaptation of ideas from other

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<sup>52</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Theological Education: Its Unities and Diversities,” *Theological Education* 30, Supplement 1 (1993): 97.

<sup>53</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Three Theological Perspectives to ‘Jesus Christ Frees and Unites’,” *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology* 16 (March 1976): 43.

<sup>54</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Participation of Culture in the Transformation of Humanity: Forms of Ecumenical Theology in Asia,” *AJT* 7, no. 2 (1993): 225.

<sup>55</sup> Koyama, “The Role of Theology in Asia Today,” 9. Koyama considered Bible translation to be at the cutting edge of contextualisation in Asia.

<sup>56</sup> Koyama, “Participation of Culture,” 218.

religions without appreciating their original meaning. "The non-monotheistic (non-jealous) Asian religious mind," he warned, "provides fertile soil for syncretism."<sup>57</sup> There must, then, be careful discernment in the use of beliefs and values from Asian traditions so that they cohere with the gospel message. He accused the Thai Buddhist monk, Buddhadasa, of falling into the second danger by taking Christian scripture and filling it with Buddhist meaning without reference to what it meant for Jesus. Koyama called this "transubstantiation" and contrasted it with the process of accommodation:

Transubstantiation is a quick and easy way. Theology does not have to travail so long as she rendezvous with the shortcut of transubstantiation. Accommodation is a toilsome and troublesome process since it is an art of communication inspired by love. It requires patience and insight.<sup>58</sup>

He further explained this process of accommodation as "a thoughtful attempt to root the inner meaning of the message of Jesus Christ from one historical and cultural milieu to another."<sup>59</sup>

For Buddhist terms to convey Christian meaning, he saw the need for careful and radical alteration of their original meaning. He provided an example of this in his treatment of Buddhism's 'three marks of existence': *anatta*, *anicca* and *dukkha*. After considering their Buddhist meaning he gave them a Christian reinterpretation, making them relevant to the Thai context unfamiliar with Israel's conception of God as historically involved:

*Dukkha* does not simply mean 'unsatisfactoriness' of life. It signifies specifically man's unsatisfactory commitment and devotion to God. *Anicca*, in the same way, does not mean man's realization of his existence as impermanent and transitory. It means that man breaks his covenant relationship with God through his changeable and transitory devotion to God. The doctrine of *anatta*, which inspires man to eliminate his 'I', the source of all troubles, becomes a useful indicator that when man rejects God's covenantal faithfulness with him, he moves towards destruction and the elimination of himself. . . . The depth-psychological analysis of man given by the Buddha is now historicized.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Theology in Contact*, The Word for the World Series No. 4 (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Koyama, "The Role of Theology in Asia Today," 10. Buddhadasa gave a series of lectures on the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity at McGilvery Theological Seminary in Chiang Mai where Koyama taught. These were printed in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*, Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture Fifth Series (Bangkok: Borisat Samakhisan, 1967).

<sup>59</sup> Koyama, review of *Theology of the Pain of God*, 69.

<sup>60</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 154-155.

This is not syncretism, he said, but “*participation* of the insights of the Buddha in the Christian understanding of history.”<sup>61</sup> Such a process is necessary, he claimed, to transpose the Christian faith into a Buddhist context and create a bridge to minds steeped in Buddhist concepts. These terms then became “baptized servants” of Christian theology in the course of contextualisation.<sup>62</sup> Though he has done some pioneering work in this area of contextualisation in a Buddhist setting, his efforts belong mainly to the 1960s and 70s. In more recent times he has been less adventurous in ‘baptising’ Buddhist terms as he has moved out of the immediate context.

Koyama also recognised that Thai Christians naturally began to indigenise their faith so that it reflected and made sense within the culture they lived. He called this doing “kitchen theology,” where the Thai Christian added “Buddhist salt” (thinking and practices from Buddhist influenced culture) to their Christian faith.<sup>63</sup> He noted at the time that this was a largely subconscious action, and that there was little awareness of its significance for theology. In this process Buddhist converts were drawn to aspects of Christian theology that had a similarity to Buddhism. He perceived this in the Thai Christian liking for what he called “Aristotelian Pepper”<sup>64</sup> (theology under the influence of Aristotelian thought), because it fitted with the Buddhist understanding of everything having a clearly defined cause and effect. He warned against such indigenisation, giving the example of being confronted by someone with leprosy. The leprosy, according to the indigenised view, would be explained too simplistically as a result of the leper’s past *karma* or sin, and thus contradict the gospel. He was aware, however, that many complex issues are involved in ‘kitchen theology’ and that not all potential theological developments were necessarily detrimental to Christian faith. He was not sure, he wrote, whether to throw out the salt and pepper or “attempt to see *what kind* of pepper and salt is seasoning Christ, and try to present a well-seasoned Christ in *co-operation* with the local pepper and salt?”<sup>65</sup> From the subsequent development of his theology it seems he has trodden the path of the latter alternative, yet is always willing to question the meaning and ethical relevance of the Buddhist seasoning.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>62</sup> Koyama, *Theology in Contact*, 61.

<sup>63</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 88.

## ***Buddhist Contributions to Contextualisation***

Respect for Buddhism is a fundamental necessity, according to Koyama, if the Christian faith is to make sense to Asians. He recalled the example of his grandfather's conversion upon hearing the preaching of an English lay missionary:

The gospel of Christ which my grandfather heard was presented in broken Japanese with a heavy English accent. What a moment of inspiration to hear the gospel in a broken language! One of the few things I heard and I still remember from my grandfather about his conversion to Christianity from Buddhism was that he was impressed by this man who was able to say that Jesus Christ is Lord without ever making derogatory comments upon Japanese culture or Buddhism. 'This made me to follow Christ!' he told me.<sup>66</sup>

The Buddhist spiritual heritage is not to be dismissed. Thai Buddhists who converted to Christianity, he commented, should neither reject their Buddhist past nor treat the Buddha and Christ as equals. "His turning to the Buddha for refuge must in some way change," he advised. "Still," he continued, "he may have a grateful memory of how the Buddha nourished him spiritually before he came to Jesus Christ."<sup>67</sup> Koyama reflected personally:

After I became a Christian I still lived in the cultural world of Japan. I worship Christ with the emotion and thought which derives from the culture of Japan. I am led to believe that Jesus Christ inspires me to find out ways in which I can make use of my Japanese heritage.<sup>68</sup>

Somehow the Buddhist past of a Christian convert must be integrated into following Christ.

The value Buddhism places on religious practice helped Koyama to see how the gospel could be better communicated in Asia. Firstly, there had to be recognition of the damage done by missionary practices and problems associated with introducing theological arguments about God's existence. He wrote:

In my spiritual pilgrimage in Asia I have encountered countless criticisms, sometimes vehement, against the behaviors of historical Christianity voiced by the people of other faiths, but I have not heard even one criticism directed personally at Jesus Christ. Asian spirituality gladly accepts this 'Holy Man of Nazareth' (Asia's Christology). That the 'Holy Man of the Shakya Clan' and the 'Holy Man of Nazareth' can have a profound communion of mutual understanding is a constant element in the Asian religious

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<sup>66</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 15-16. The missionary was Herbert George Brand.

<sup>67</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 66.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



imagination. However, when the concept of 'God' (or gods) is introduced, the sense of discrepancy and disunity appears.<sup>69</sup>

Koyama sympathised with a way of communicating Christ to others that was more Asian in character, where the focus is on praxis and on self-giving love rather than metaphysical argument. He found this to be more in tune with the witness of Christ, as well as in keeping with the Buddhist understanding that religious truth is authenticated through being lived.

Dialogue with Buddhism, as well as awakening Koyama to 'kitchen theology,' led him to recognise a wider interplay of religious influences taking place in Asian religions. He commented on Thai monks:

While the monks work hard to emancipate themselves from the world, they are deeply involved in interplay with the values, ideology and spirituality of their surroundings, including a strongly history-oriented spirituality of Christianity.<sup>70</sup>

Not even in Thailand could the Buddhist escape interacting and learning from other religions. Christians, though, were likewise affected. Much of this interplay, as in 'kitchen theology,' went on at a subconscious level but Koyama later appealed for a more conscious and open appreciation of values in Buddhist and other Asian traditions. He wrote:

To reject 'Asia's Wisdom' would be an act of self-idolatry on the part of the Church. If the Semitic transcendence is vertical transcendence, Asia's could be called horizontal transcendence. Both have the dimension of transcendence. When the vertical transcendence engages in dialogue with the horizontal transcendence, we may come to a new appreciation of the symbol of universality.<sup>71</sup>

The Buddha here epitomises the horizontal transcendence found in Asia. Koyama sensed that dialogue would open up the possibility for the development of a "Christian interreligious spirituality"<sup>72</sup> which, while recognisably Christian, would not be afraid to accommodate and be inspired by religious beliefs and values from other traditions. In the field of Buddhist-Christian dialogue he mentioned Aloysius Pieris, Thomas Merton and William Johnston as being important collaborators in the development of such a spirituality.

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<sup>69</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Theocentric Christology: A Response to Mark Heim," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies (JES)* 24, no. 1 (1987): 39.

<sup>70</sup> Koyama, "Interplay with Other Religions," 556.

<sup>71</sup> Koyama, "The Role of Translation in Developing Indigenous Theologies – An Asian View," in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1990), 102.

<sup>72</sup> Koyama, "Interplay with Other Religions," 561.

Koyama also saw a role for Buddhism to judge directly Christian doctrine. He placed Buddhists, because of their religious struggle against greed, into a grouping of humanity that included people who work for justice, peace and human rights. From time to time this group have constituted, for Koyama, what Abraham Lincoln called the “considerate judgement of mankind,”<sup>73</sup> the moral conscience of the world. To indigenise the gospel, he said, Christianity needs the help of this group, since they embody religious values that reflect the mind of Christ. He went further and claimed that “Christian doctrines must be such that the considerate judgement of mankind would be happy to consent.”<sup>74</sup> So he considered Francis Xavier’s application of the doctrine of eternal damnation to Buddhists in Japan who had not heard the gospel as unacceptable, because it was abhorrent to the ‘considerate judgement of mankind.’ For true contextualisation to take place, therefore, Christians must not only adopt and adapt Buddhist terms and concepts, but also be open to the judgements that come from the ethical orientation of the Buddhist path.

An openness to dialogue with Buddhism, then, has been an important factor in Koyama’s development of contextual theology. It shaped his methodology by impressing upon him the need for dialogue so that the Christian message could be presented more effectively. The goal was better evangelism but it involved a deeper understanding and appreciation of Buddhism. This in turn enabled him to perceive the underlying influence of Buddhism on the hearts and minds of converts to Christianity. He became increasingly aware thereafter of a subtle interplay of religious traditions, which open up the possibility for new developments in Christian theology and spirituality emerging out of the Asian context.

### 3.2.3 Social Ethics

#### ***Cosmological and Eschatological Approaches to History***

A concern for social ethics is central to Koyama’s work. To understand this it is necessary to consider another of his theological interests - history. He often reflects on the nature and significance of people’s understanding of history. “To the degree we are engaged in history,” he said early on, “we would be engaged in

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<sup>73</sup> Koyama, “The Tradition and Indigenisation,” 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

theology.”<sup>75</sup> Underlying this statement lies his belief in a God passionately involved in human history to establish love with justice. Yet, this God respects human responsibility. Koyama stated:

I understand that the unique and enduring spiritual insight which the Judaeo-Christian tradition contributes to mankind is that the personal God, the one who creates, preserves and consummates all things, does not ‘handle’ history.<sup>76</sup>

God, contends Koyama, enters into the very depths of history, especially through the incarnation, but does not seek to control or manipulate the human response to the divine presence or people’s responsibility toward each other.

A contrast is made by Koyama between the Asian and Semitic views of history. Asians are considered to have a cosmological view that is shaped by their circular understanding of time and preference to locate the divine within nature. The Semitic view of history is eschatological where time is seen as linear, and where there also exists a radical discontinuity between God and creation. These viewpoints give rise to different spiritualities. The Asian favours a spirituality that embraces nature and finds meaning within the continuity of history; one that seeks tranquillity and harmony with the cosmos. Semitic spirituality stresses discontinuity within history as human life is encountered by God, and seeks history’s transformation in the belief that it is moving towards eschatological fulfilment. The danger of the cosmological orientation, in Koyama’s opinion, is that it can lead to a disregard for social ethics because it fails to take the need for social change in history seriously. He found this in Japanese attitudes to Imperial rule during the war; their cosmological outlook prevented them from discerning the abuse of power. He claimed:

The Semitic tradition of ‘the maker of heaven and earth’ has given humanity a socioethical insight that is deeply concerned with history. It contains the principle of transcendence by which the imperial power can be criticized.<sup>77</sup>

A contrast was drawn then, between the socio-ethical orientation of the Semitic and Christian approach and the ethically negligent Asian view.

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<sup>75</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Director’s Presentation to the Executive Committee of the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia (February, 1972),” *SEAJT* 13, no. 2 (1972): 69.

<sup>76</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “‘Building the House by Righteousness’: The Ecumenical Horizons of Minjung Theology,” in *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 140-141.

However, Koyama admitted that the evidence of history itself undermined his contrast. For one thing, Asians seemed to have a more personal and concrete approach to their gods than in the West, where the pursuit of wealth had banished God to a remote "First Universal Principle."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, he noted that Asians were quite capable of outdoing Christians in the practice of compassion and concern for justice. In particular, Asians showed a respect for nature missing in the West, where the eschatological outlook had depreciated creation and so allowed humans to act violently towards the planet and each other. For Koyama, the presence of the divine is predicated on ethical practice.<sup>79</sup> Hence, he encouraged Christians to study and appreciate the cosmological approach to history.

Koyama then suggested that a combination of views would be beneficial: the Semitic (with its strong sense of justice and development) and the Cosmological (with its concern for harmony and continuity). He perceived a role for Third-World Christians in bringing these two views together, writing:

They prefer, due to their cultures, to look at redemption through creation. They are aware of the painful fact that the planetary ecological crisis has been largely caused by Western Christian civilization. Eschatology confronts. Cosmology embraces. They are anticipating the possibility of an eschatology that embraces.<sup>80</sup>

He also found that Jesus combined the two outlooks. Jesus brought disruption into human society with the judgement of God and by the manner of his violent death (a sign of the eschatological), but the purpose of such disruption was to 'embrace' humanity with God's love (a sign of the cosmological). Koyama commented:

Embrace is predominantly a nature image. But it is in this image, not in the eschatological image of confrontation, that God comes to us in the ultimate fashion.<sup>81</sup>

The 'ultimate fashion' refers to the all-embracing love of God given to humanity through the witness of Christ and triumph of this love through adversity. So Christians can learn from the Asian approach to history, but at the same time Christ shows humanity that it is through being broken and suffering for others that the embrace of God's love is manifested.

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<sup>78</sup> Koyama, "Asian Christian Contribution to 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'," *SEAJT* 17, no. 2 (1976): 71.

<sup>79</sup> For example, see Kosuke Koyama, "Adam in Deep Sleep," in *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology*, ed. Emerito Nacpil and Douglas J. Elwood (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), 41-42.

<sup>80</sup> Koyama, "Jesus Christ Who Has Gone," 103.

<sup>81</sup> Koyama, "The Asian Approach to Christ," 443.

Koyama admitted that interpreting the significance of history is a difficult matter. The Western linear approach suffers from a tendency to violence, whereas the Asian circular understanding tends to a neglect of ethical responsibility. Yet both are seen as having insights into God's way of relating to human history. Despite his many references to different approaches to history, what is finally important for him are not so much particular views on history but the fruits of justice and peace that reflect a mind motivated by God's love.<sup>82</sup>

### ***Following Jesus to the Periphery of Society***

Koyama has been described as a liberation theologian.<sup>83</sup> It is not a description that he uses for himself, though he is sympathetic to liberation theology and his own theology reflects many of its concerns.<sup>84</sup> He places a commitment to peace and justice at the heart of Christian life. "Without concern for social justice (Jer. 7:6, 22:13)," he stated, "one cannot point to Christ and say, 'Behold the Lamb of God' (John 1:29)."<sup>85</sup> A number of social issues are dealt with in his writings. He is at his most critical when condemning militarism and the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. While the destruction of war revealed the madness of State Shintoism in the East, he added that the bombing of Hiroshima "closed the books on the presumed moral superiority of Western Christendom."<sup>86</sup> Racism is another important justice issue for him. He often refers to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States, which taught Asians that God was not white.<sup>87</sup>

Ethical dilemmas surrounding the use of technology have also been given much coverage in his writings from early on. He recognised that technology brought benefits to humankind, but perceived fundamental conflicts between its use and Christian faith. Using a memorable metaphor, he spoke of the "three-mile an hour" God to express the slow moving and inefficient way in which God relates to humankind, and contrasted this with technological progress, which seeks fast and

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<sup>82</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "New World - New Creation: Mission in Power and Faith," *Mission Studies* 10, no. 1-2 (1993): 72-74.

<sup>83</sup> Deane William Fenn, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 78-80.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see his article on Minjung theology: Koyama, "Building the House by Righteousness," 137-152.

<sup>85</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Missiology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 314.

<sup>86</sup> Koyama, "Father, Forgive...", 273. On the same page he added, "It is no accident that religious studies in universities and seminaries became popular after 1945."

<sup>87</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "American Church History from a Third World Perspective," in *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935-1985*, ed. David W. Lotz, Donald W. Shriver and John F. Wilson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 181.



trouble-free results.<sup>88</sup> Technology in its drive for efficiency tends to dehumanise, take away any sense of the holy, and lead to social inequality. In particular it is “used to make the world more violent.”<sup>89</sup> It is the selfish drive behind such technological advance, a product of Western Christian civilisation exported to Asia, which he considered being at the root of the global ecological crisis. In response, he stressed the need to appreciate the interdependence of all living things and called on religious people to work together to tackle common problems.<sup>90</sup>

“Since God is not partial,” wrote Koyama, “God takes the side of the poor and oppressed.”<sup>91</sup> God’s bias to the poor is but a reflection of God’s universal love for all. Jesus shows this by going to the periphery of society: to the outcast, the sinner, and the poor. This was dramatically enacted through his death on the cross between two thieves. Behind the cross, contended Koyama, stands radical ethical demands. He wrote:

The crucified Christ tells us that we should pay more attention to the millions of crosses on which the poor and oppressed of the world are nailed than to Christ crucified himself! Dangerous paradox of grace! Perhaps the only way to make the scandalous crucified Christ into an idol is to concentrate our spiritual life on him alone and ignore the countless crosses that constitute the central reality of human life in this world today.<sup>92</sup>

It is only by “establishing solidarity with the oppressed masses,” he said, that Third World churches “can attain and display apostolicity before its own people.”<sup>93</sup> As Christ has gone before, so Christians are called to follow him to the periphery of society.

In his concern for those on the periphery Koyama, rather than enter into dialogue with Marxism and other political theories, is mostly content to point out the challenge of biblical texts to modern social realities.<sup>94</sup> He does, however, also affirm

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<sup>88</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 3-7.

<sup>89</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Religion in the Global Village,” in *The Contribution of Carl Michalson to Modern Theology: Studies in Interpretation and Application*, ed. Henry O. Thompson (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellin Press, 1991), 229.

<sup>90</sup> Koyama, “New Heaven,” 13.

<sup>91</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Theology in the Midst and Aftermath of War,” in *Stand Firm and Take Action: A Festschrift for Milan Opocensky*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 34, ed. Páraic Réamonn and H. S. Wilson, (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1996), 55.

<sup>92</sup> Koyama, “Ritual of Limping Dance: A Botanical Observation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, Supplement 1 (1981): 103.

<sup>93</sup> Koyama, “American Church History,” 182.

<sup>94</sup> Koyama is critical, however, of both communism and capitalism for the injustices and ecological destruction they have caused. See Kosuke Koyama, “The Eucharist: Ecumenical and Ecological,” *ER* 44, no. 1 (1992): 89.

that God's presence is to be found in the ethical commitment of people of other religions, and within secular movements for social justice. Indeed, he reflected that Christians are humbled by others' practice of compassion and their own history of violence. In a few writings he quotes the words of Tissa Balasuriya:

'Why is it that in spite of hundreds of thousands of eucharistic celebrations, Christians continue as selfish as before? Why have the 'Christian' peoples been the most cruel colonizers of human history? Why is the gap of income, wealth, knowledge, and power growing in the world today – and that in favour of the 'Christian' peoples?'<sup>95</sup>

Part of what it means to follow Jesus to the periphery is, according to Koyama, for Christians to recognise their complicity in perpetrating social injustices and to enter into dialogue with others in order to come together to tackle such injustices.

### ***A Buddhist 'Neglect of History' or a Third Way?***

Early on during his stay in Thailand, Koyama detected a difference in how Buddhists and Christians related to history that had repercussions for social ethics. The Buddhist emphasis on detachment from desires, even the desire for existence itself, led him to conclude that it encouraged apathy and a consequent disregard for history. "The Buddhist *apatheia* fosters 'neglect of history,'" he charged, "because it teaches that only through the ultimate flight from history (*anatta*) can man [*sic*] achieve the desired state of *apatheia*."<sup>96</sup> The Christian approach on the other hand, which he explained through using images such as the 'wrath of God,' ensured that involvement in historical realities took centre stage. He refers to the contrasting positions of Buddhism and Christianity in several writings. For example, he recalled a meeting with a Buddhist monk where they discussed the gospel verse from John 1:1. The monk commented to him:

My friend, This [*sic*] is quite a *noisy* religion. I am afraid that we are getting further and further away from the bliss of tranquillity and detachment.<sup>97</sup>

Koyama concurred that Christianity was indeed 'noisy,' in the sense that God was attached to humanity through participation in history.

In Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow, Koyama was dissatisfied with the approach to the world and

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>96</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "'Wrath of God' vs. Thai Theologia Glorae," *SEAJT* 5, no. 1 (1963): 21.

<sup>97</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Christian Presence in the Light of Our Theme: In Him All Things Hold Together," *SEAJT* 10, no. 1 (1968): 12.

historical processes he found.<sup>98</sup> He admitted these teachings contained wisdom and spiritual insight but saw, underpinning them, an understanding that the world was to be transcended not transformed and that salvation was conceived in a-historical terms. He observed the same approach to history in the attitude of the Theravada *arahant* who, tradition taught, was to proceed with eyes lowered when entering a village to avoid distraction from the spiritual path. Koyama chose this example to show how Buddhism downplayed the importance of historical involvement in the world. Speaking of God by contrast, Koyama wrote:

His direction is not *away from* history (detachment - 'eyes lowered'), but *towards* history (attachment - 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt'). Perhaps this is the basic contrast between Theravada Buddhism and the Judaeo-Christian faith: the two histories, the two eyes.<sup>99</sup>

Then, in an imaginary dialogue with the Apostle James, Koyama indicated what Thai Buddhists could learn from the Apostle's New Testament letter: "detachment not from the world, but from the corrupting influence of the world."<sup>100</sup>

Mahayana Buddhism, Koyama found, was also guilty of a 'neglect of history.' Commenting on the message found in the Mahayana scriptures of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* (Perfection of Wisdom Scriptures), he wrote, "The *Prajnaparamita* of Mahayana Buddhism teaches us to become detached from this world and to go to 'the beyond' this world."<sup>101</sup> God by comparison is constantly coming towards and entering into human history. Another contrast, more recently made, is between the Mahayana ideal of the *bodhisattva* and Israel's understanding of God's steadfast love (*hesed*). While the people of Israel "were able to express the *hesed* of God in concrete historical language," Koyama stated that Mahayana Buddhism resorted to "Bodhisattva compassion metaphysics" to speak of the religious ideal.<sup>102</sup> Israel's faith was historically based, the Buddhist belief metaphysically based in stressing the psychological existence of the *bodhisattva's* compassion in the mind. The 'basic contrast' between Theravada Buddhism and Christianity, then, was again reflected in his dialogue with Mahayana Buddhism. The religious goal of the two religions, he held, differed fundamentally because of this contrast and this had a

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<sup>98</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 133-160. For more detail on the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow see pages 120-121 of this thesis.

<sup>99</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 152-153.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>101</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "The Theology of the Cross and the Self-Consciousness of the Church," *AJT* 8, no. 1 (1994): 7.

crucial bearing on social ethics. This can be seen in what he wrote in relation to post-war Japanese militarism:

The Buddha directs our attention to the peace *beyond* time. Jesus Christ invites us to experience peace *in* time. The former values timelessness, the latter timefulness. Time is filled when the act of love fills it up. This 'fullness of time', this love which makes time meaningful - this opposes the 2.1 trillion yen military budget of Japan.<sup>103</sup>

The Christian religion is predisposed, due to the significance Jesus places upon history, to take socio-ethical responsibility more seriously.

The Buddhist understanding of history, Koyama sensed, is conditioned by the doctrine of *karma*. The overcoming of one's bad *karma* can take countless lives to achieve and liberation is seen as a long and slow process. He described this belief as representing "the fundamental spirit of popular Buddhism in Asia."<sup>104</sup> It is a spirit, he feared, which fostered a sense of apathy and neglect of social responsibility. He found it in Thailand and warned:

Such a view of life has a negative influence upon our social action. Individually or collectively we are what we are - poor, hungry, oppressed, sick - because of the karma!<sup>105</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that he saw Christianity challenging the Asian Buddhist mind with a new conception of history rooted in Israel's experience of God. During his stay in Thailand and early work in Singapore he believed that the fast pace of economic change in Asia, driven by a desire to be like the prosperous West, was "imparting a sense of secular eschatology to the mass of South East Asians."<sup>106</sup> This he hoped would make it easier for Asians to appreciate the biblical orientation towards history and the significance of Jesus' incarnation.

Buddhism, in several of Koyama's writings, would appear then to suffer from the dangers inherent in a cosmological approach to history, namely flight from the world and neglect of social ethics. Koyama was aware, however, that a closer look at Buddhist teachings and a study of history itself revealed a different reality. Early on

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<sup>103</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 109.

<sup>104</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Union of Ethical Walking and Theological Beholding: Reflections from an Asian American," in *Yearning to Breathe Free: Liberation Theologies in the U.S.*, ed. Mar Peter-Raoul, Linda Rennie Forcey and Robert Fredrick Hunter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 113.

<sup>105</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Bangalore: A Theological Travelogue to Five Intelligible Words," *Mid-Stream* 18, no. 1 (1979): 45.

<sup>106</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Editorial: Missiology in South East Asia," *SEAJT* 10, nos. 2 & 3 (1968-69): 5.

he viewed Buddhism as a “redemptive religion”<sup>107</sup> not simply a philosophy, and one that took an orientation to history that differed from the general cosmic approach of Asian peoples. After quoting from the Thai monk, Buddhadasa, on how Buddhism seeks to overcome the bonds of *karma*, Koyama remarked:

The way Buddhism speaks of salvation is strongly teleological. Instead of saying that Buddhism preaches cyclicism, one should dare to say that it stands for a purposeful ascending spiralism.<sup>108</sup>

He also identified Buddhism’s introduction to Japan as an event that disturbed the cosmic religiosity of the time. Buddhism, he suggested, relativised nature through its philosophy of non-attachment and emphasis on striving for spiritual enlightenment: the idea of negation of life in order to arrive at a more profound affirmation of truth within life. He commented:

Now the profound suggestion that life might be negated even during life came through Buddhist thought. It was a negation which was not natural as death is natural. . . . This concept of negation introduced to the Japanese continuity orientation the possibility of discontinuity and opened the way for dialectical thinking to develop. . . . The universal religion, Buddhism, taught the creative value of negation.<sup>109</sup>

So Buddhism displayed a concern for change and development within the historical process. It could not be dismissed as a-historically minded.

Later on Koyama declared that Buddhism represented a third approach to history, sandwiched in between the eschatological orientation of monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) and the cyclic/nature orientation of cosmological religions (Hinduism, Taoism). He called this “self-history-orientation.”<sup>110</sup> History is taken seriously, though this is done through focusing on an analysis and development of the inner person. In his opinion, the Buddhist teaching that confirmed this interest in history is the emphasis placed on overcoming greed. He stated:

The critical awareness of human greed bridges between the cosmological and the historical. If so, the fundamental message of Buddhism must be studied carefully against the simplistic view that ‘Buddhism is not a history concerned religion.’<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Kosuke Koyama, review of *Die Religion des Buddhismus. Band I. Der Heilsweg des Mönchtums*, by Dieter Schlingloff, *IRM* 54 (1965): 247.

<sup>108</sup> Koyama, “The Role of Theology in Asia Today,” 18.

<sup>109</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 154.

<sup>110</sup> Koyama, “The Tradition and Indigenisation,” 3.

<sup>111</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 111.



The central role played in human life by greed, as understood in Buddhism, is seen by him as a realistic assessment of human nature. He argued that the overcoming of greed is more fundamental to the teaching of the Buddha than that of *karma*:

I am tempted to say that in the gospel of the Buddha the karman is seen in the light of the shattering of the kingpost of greed rather than the other way round. In this critical moment existential religious experience takes the lead over the metaphysical deterministic karman outlook of life.<sup>112</sup>

The Buddha would, therefore, oppose those who wanted to excuse social evil as simply an outplaying of *karma*; he would denounce the evil and call on those who perpetrate it to overcome their greed.

Another reason that compelled Koyama to reassess the Buddhist relation to history was the social and political involvement of the Buddha and Buddhists. He views the Buddha as an impressive historical figure whose rejection of the caste system represented a radical break from an oppressive social institution. He also pointed to modern examples of Buddhist involvement in social affairs - the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhists against the Vietnam War, the anti-Communist stance of the Buddhist King of Thailand, and the establishment of the Japanese Buddhist political party *Komeito*.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, the ascetic practices of monastic Buddhism, with its emphasis on a disciplined and simple lifestyle, impressed him. Again, it was a living encounter with this spirituality that caused him to take issue with a stereotyped view of Buddhism and to reassess his own. He wrote:

Ordinarily it is said that Buddhism does not take history seriously. Such a remark has become a favourite saying among Christian theologians. My eight years in Thailand, the land of Theravada Buddhism, radically changed my view. Often Buddhists take history more seriously than Christians! Whatever one sees in the 240,000 monks throughout the kingdom of Thailand, one cannot fail to see the ideal and commitment to poverty. . . . They renounce material possessions. This is the right way to live in this evil historical time, free from all the snares of history. . . . If history is not taken seriously, what is the use of practising renunciation to overcome history and to reach the salvific tranquillity of *nirvana*?<sup>114</sup>

More recently Koyama has reiterated this understanding and concluded, "Awareness of 'history' is not an exclusive possession of the children of Abraham."<sup>115</sup> He noted also that a doctrine of *karma* seemed to be more operative in the West than in

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 118-119, 127.

<sup>114</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Koyama, "Participation of Culture," 222.

Buddhist countries, through its judgement of human success and failure in materialistic and individualistic terms.<sup>116</sup>

### ***Buddhist Social Ethics and The Practice of Compassion***

Buddhist ethics, in Koyama's opinion, are mainly focussed on the moral conduct of the individual. However, he found this to be relevant to social ethics. After a brief study of some Buddhist texts he wrote:

Realizing the hazard of making any sort of general comment upon so broad a subject as the social ethics of Buddhism, I am compelled to observe that Buddhism is primarily interested in personal ethics rather than in social ethics. But the relationship of the two is not that of polarization. It is a profoundly complementary relationship. The rational and mystical elements in Buddha's discourses on the human ills can equip us better as we take up study of social ills and social salvation.<sup>117</sup>

The personal ethic provides the necessary basis for developing a strong and sustainable socio-ethical concern.

Koyama also recognised that the understanding and practice of compassion in Buddhism provided Buddhism with an impressive social ethic. In this regard he considered the Buddhist monks of Thailand to be both "a blessing to Thailand" and "a blessing to the world."<sup>118</sup> He understood the practice of mercy to be at the heart of their religious life and further commented:

'To show mercy' is the enduring tradition in the land of Theravada Buddhism. . . . The Buddha taught the people of Thailand 'to be merciful' without concluding that sentence 'as your heavenly Father is merciful'.<sup>119</sup>

Using Buddhist language, Koyama coined the term "*meedtaa-karunaa-ology*"<sup>120</sup> (*metta* - 'loving kindness'; *karuna* - 'compassion'), to describe this mercy-oriented spirituality. From his writings this can be seen to challenge Christianity in two areas, theology and praxis. On the theological level Buddhist compassion calls into question Christian exclusivism. Regarding this, he recalled the story of the Good Samaritan and stated:

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<sup>116</sup> Koyama, "Bangalore," 45; idem, "Union of Ethical Walking," 113-114.

<sup>117</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 127.

<sup>118</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Pilgrim or Tourist: 50 Short Meditations* (Singapore: CCA, 1974), 34.

<sup>119</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 5. In his coining of this term, Koyama uses the Buddhist words as transliterated from Thai rather than Pali. See under เมตตา (*meedtaa*) in Mary R. Haas, compiler, *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964), 408-409.

It is better to be merciful in the name of the Buddha than to be cruel in the name of Christ. It is better to become a neighbour with a Samaritan theology (presumably a wrong theology in the view of the Jews) than to desert the beaten victim with Jewish theology (presumably a right theology in the view of the Jews).<sup>121</sup>

In terms of praxis, he spoke of the need for Christians to take their lead from Buddhists in developing a “‘*meedtaa-karunaa*-ological’ missiology in the world that suffers immensely from the neglect of this ancient virtue.”<sup>122</sup> The Buddhist practice of mercy provides the basis of a social ethic that Christians should learn from.

Compassion was also a quality that Koyama found in Mahayana Buddhism. He recognised it in the care shown by Buddhists towards his sick father as noted earlier. He also saw it among many Japanese who at the time of the war stood against imperialism and were able, within their own traditions, to “find spiritual resources to resist tyranny.”<sup>123</sup> Like other commentators, Koyama pointed to a difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism that had implications for social ethics:

Theravada (Elders) Buddhism is concerned about private salvation. In contrast, Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism aims to save many. The central figure in this tradition is the *bodhisattva* (awakened being) who takes a vow to postpone salvation until all living beings have achieved salvation. Mahayana is sometimes called *Bodhisattva-yana*. Here is a strong contrast between private religion and social religion.<sup>124</sup>

The *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism presented for Koyama “a being for others somewhat in the manner of Jesus Christ.”<sup>125</sup> Rather than look at how the *bodhisattva* ideal was embodied in actual practice though, Koyama preferred to look at the inspirational character of the ideal expressed through Buddhist images and the metaphysical teachings associated with it. He showed, for example, how the *bodhisattva* image inspires an understanding of the proper use of technology, writing:

Asia has provided us with one of the most beautiful and meaningful symbols of mercy. The *Bodhisattva* (*Kwan-Non* in Japanese), are Enlightened Beings in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. . . . They have many hands. Some of them have even one thousand hands, each with an eye. These hands carry all sorts of objects which will be of help to man in need. The *Bodhisattva* [*sic*] are like well equipped ambulances, ever ready to come and help. All

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<sup>121</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 41.

<sup>122</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 20.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

technological devices are at the command of mercy and concern. Mercy uses technology. Is this not a beautiful image within the Buddhist tradition? It asks us to use our vast technological skills and powers in the service of mankind not in the destruction of mankind.<sup>126</sup>

Looking further into the source of mercy in the Mahayana tradition, Koyama compared the Buddha's teachings against forming a possessive mind and the Mahayana doctrine of *sunyata* with the message of the 'Preacher' in the book of Ecclesiastes. He explained that *sunyata* is not nihilistic but represents a way of interpreting reality through pointing to the impermanent nature of all phenomena, and so warning against forming attachments to them. Significantly for him, *sunyata*, as expressed in the Zen concept of *mu-shin* ('no-mind'), frees the mind for compassionate involvement in the world. He commented:

It is understood that out of this freedom comes the spirituality of mercy which is the source of Buddhist ethics. The Sanskrit word for 'mercy' is *karuna*. Originally this word signifies 'groaning with those who suffer'. *Karuna* is a strong social concept. Only those who follow the way of emancipation from personal greed can groan with those who are suffering. In *karuna* the emancipated soul (*mu-shin*) expresses itself.<sup>127</sup>

To emphasise the importance of the Buddhist teaching on impermanence in the discussion on *sunyata*, he retold the Buddhist parable of Kosa Gotami and the Mustard Seed.<sup>128</sup> The story concerns a woman called Gotami who is relieved when she gives birth to a son, after being reviled by her husband's family for not producing a male child. However, her life was plunged into despair when her young child died. She sought desperately for some medicine to bring him back to life and eventually came to the Buddha. The Buddha asked her to bring a mustard seed from a house that had not experienced death. After much trying she returned to the Buddha empty handed; death had visited every household that she called on. She learned that all things, including life itself, are impermanent. With this wisdom she was freed from her torment. This story, like *sunyata*, emphasised for Koyama the compassionate nature of the Buddha and his teachings on the impermanent nature of life, which differed fundamentally from the sense of life's futility in the book of Ecclesiastes. So Buddhist doctrine, Koyama argued, though obviously different from that of the Christian, at times does reflect an outlook on life and a concern for others that is

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<sup>126</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 144.

<sup>127</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 235.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 236-237. The story can be found in E. A. Burtt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 43-46.

more in keeping with the mind of Christ than some of the biblical witness. He commented:

We catch a glimpse of this agitated mind of God through the Mahayana doctrine of groaning (showing mercy). When we say that all is *not* vanity, then we begin to have a theologically agitated mind. The ordinary distinction between East and West must be re-examined in terms of the presence of this agitated mind. For God all is not vanity. All is full of promise. Therefore the mind of God is agitated.<sup>129</sup>

The wisdom of *sunyata* that enables the practice of mercy thus shows a certain correspondence to the compassionate God.

Despite the similarity between the compassion practised in Buddhism and that of Christians, Koyama believes that it receives a uniquely powerful focus in the passion of Christ. This is evident in his meditation on the crucified hands of Jesus. He began the meditation by reflecting on the imagery of a Buddha statue in Kyoto where the Buddha is depicted with open and webbed hands. The webbed hands signify the Buddha's aim to "scoop all into salvation."<sup>130</sup> Koyama commented: "I thank God for this image. It expresses the depth and width of human need for salvation by the hands of good-will and mercy."<sup>131</sup> He contrasted the open hands of the Buddha with an image of Lenin's closed fist, which suggested violence. Finally he came to reflect on the nailed hands of Jesus, which are neither fully open nor fully closed. This is important. If closed, the truth becomes ideological; if open, the truth is not focussed enough. Jesus' hands are "*painfully open*."<sup>132</sup> They represent the desire to bring all to salvation by means of God's love, but their *painful* openness points to the costly historical sacrifice involved in such love. By comparison the Buddhist image for compassion appears metaphysical and somewhat detached from actual suffering in the world. So Koyama confessed, "This agonizing image of the painful hands of Jesus is the image that has become decisive for my Christian life."<sup>133</sup>

Similar to other theologians representing the Third World, then, Koyama claimed that a commitment to history is fundamental to Christian social ethics.<sup>134</sup> When it comes to Buddhism, he seems to oscillate between seeing it as positively

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<sup>129</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 239.

<sup>130</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 23.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Koyama, "The Hand Painfully Open," 33.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Lars Thunberg, "Third World Theologies and the Appeal to History," *Studia Theologica* 40 (1986): 95-113.



related to history and at other times as negatively so. This apparent confusion may be because the witness of history itself suggests ambiguities. Christianity, he seems to be saying, is theologically predisposed to take history seriously but is shown up in practice by Buddhism, which is philosophically less inclined to take history seriously, to be less history-concerned. Overall, however, his deepening dialogue with Buddhism has clearly convinced him that the commonly held view that Buddhism neglects history is no longer tenable. He still sees differences between Buddhism and Christianity in how they conceive religious truth in relation to history, but they are no longer neatly contrasted. Though Jesus' life and death appear to represent a depth of compassion that goes beyond that found in Buddhism, he stressed that Christians can learn from the practice of compassion by Buddhists and their focus on a personal ethic as the basis for sustaining social activism. That Buddhists are capable of practising compassion to a profound level without an explicit belief in God is seen also by him as a theological challenge to exclusivism. The fact that mercy is rooted in Buddhist spirituality has encouraged him to dialogue with areas of Buddhist belief, such as *sunyata*, which at first sight might seem to stand in direct opposition to Christian beliefs.

### 3.2.4 Mission and Idolatry

#### ***Mission with a 'Crucified Mind'***

A concern for Christian mission is evident throughout Koyama's writings. To this he brings experience as a missionary in Thailand, as a member of a religious minority community in Japan, and as a theological educator concerned with contextualisation both in Asia and the United States.

At times Koyama is scathing in his criticism of Christian mission and missionaries in Asia. In particular he attacks attitudes of moral and spiritual superiority. He wrote despairingly:

It is because Christianity has become so self-righteous that I do not see much future for it. It wants to teach. It does not want to learn. It is arrogant. It is suffering from a 'teacher complex'.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 51.

The crusading spirit of missionaries is, according to Koyama, the product of a narrow and conceited theology more akin to colonialism than to the mind of Christ. He described the problem in Asia:

In truth Christians have preached Jesus Christ crucified. But have the Asians and the people in the Pacific experienced Jesus Christ as bulldozing and crucifying them? That the Christ crucified is seen as the Christ crucifying is the most serious missiological problem today in Asia.<sup>136</sup>

This ‘crucifying’ presence is reflected in the missionaries’ disdain for Asian cultures and religions. He also took issue with the form of privatised faith favoured by missionaries that focused on individual conversion and salvation. This he considered to be a by-product of European Enlightenment thought and the Western culture of individualism, which had become prevalent in Asian churches.<sup>137</sup>

Koyama is not opposed to mission or evangelism, which he said “derives from the fundamental character of the biblical God.”<sup>138</sup> It is the meaning and method of mission in Asia that bothers him. Mission, he holds, should conform to the pattern of Christ’s life of self-denial and self-giving love. It is to be carried out with a “crucified mind.”<sup>139</sup> In later writings, with an awareness of the terrible suffering and violence that humankind experienced in the twentieth century, he explained what he saw as the goal of mission:

For me the Christian mission is to bring forth the wholesomeness of abundant life to all upon the earth. In this way, perhaps *only* in this way, can we proclaim confidently and joyously the name of Christ.<sup>140</sup>

His interest is in salvation here and now, not in life after death. So he welcomed a move away from seeing mission as an “imperialistic drive to convert unbelievers to providing service in Christian love for global justice.”<sup>141</sup> This shift of focus represented an effort by Christian mission to enter more deeply into the historical realities and challenges that confront humanity today.

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<sup>136</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 109.

<sup>137</sup> Koyama, “New World - New Creation,” 69; idem, “American Church History,” 175.

<sup>138</sup> Koyama, “Missiology,” 312.

<sup>139</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 209. For his reflections on the ‘crucified mind’ in mission see 209-224.

<sup>140</sup> Koyama, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” 59.

<sup>141</sup> Koyama, “Missiology,” 314. In this article Koyama lists five themes that are critical in the shaping of contemporary missiology - humanization, oppressed minority groups, people of other religions, culture, and ecological crisis: 313-314.

## Unmasking Idolatry

The desire to unmask idolatry is central to Koyama's missionary concern. To describe the meaning of idolatry, he quotes in several places an explanation given by Paul Tillich:

'Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.'<sup>142</sup>

His reflections on idolatry are often on the worship before and during the Second World War of the Japanese Emperor, who was considered the descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The Emperor and the nationalism associated with him became the "parochial god" of Japan, claimed Koyama, which led to the "ruin of the nation."<sup>143</sup> The trauma of the war and recognition of the suffering Japan inflicted on other Asian peoples has been of immense theological significance for Koyama. He recalled the devastation of Tokyo after repeated saturation bombing and how this led him to identify with a prophecy in the book of Jeremiah concerning Judah's destruction. "In the post-war years," he wrote, "I became the Jeremiah-theologian."<sup>144</sup> Idolatry in its many disguises, especially that of national self-righteousness, became a focus for his theology and prophetic criticism. Thus, he was critical of the worship of money and power that he found in the United States as being idolatrous.<sup>145</sup>

In contrast to the 'parochial god' of Japan who led people to believe in the nation's self-importance and invulnerability, Koyama pointed to the biblical God's relentless criticism of Israel's faith. Christians, he counselled, must be first of all self-critical. He himself was critical of the "court theologians"<sup>146</sup> in the United States who sanctioned the Gulf War, supporting the idolatry of American militarism and materialism. Criticism was also levelled at the kind of theology that idolises Christ as an all-powerful and all-conquering Lord. This resulted in contempt for other religions, and was seen to give tacit support to the spirit of capitalism and militarism.<sup>147</sup>

He mostly avoids passing judgement on the worship of images found in Asian religions. This reluctance to pre-judge other religions seems to come from his

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<sup>142</sup> Koyama, "Participation of Culture," 217. Koyama quotes this in several other articles.

<sup>143</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Tribal Gods or Universal God," *Missionalia* 10, no. 3 (1982): 106.

<sup>144</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 31. The passage is Jeremiah 4.23-26.

<sup>145</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "How Many Languages Does God Speak?" *Cross Currents* 46 (1996): 171.

<sup>146</sup> Koyama, "Theology in the Midst and Aftermath of War," 56.

<sup>147</sup> Koyama, "Tribal Gods," 110.

understanding that the meaning of religious symbolism and the inner motivation of believers in worship are complex matters, not easily discerned. His reflection on an old Japanese woman who was a follower of *Oinari-san*, a religious cult of the fox, is pertinent here. She became Christian and eventually dismantled her little temple, put it on a small boat and pushed it out to the open sea. The attitude of gratefulness and reverence with which the old woman said farewell to her former shrine touched Koyama. He appreciated that her former nature religion had given her valuable spiritual nourishment.<sup>148</sup> He is not, then, in favour of condemning the religious practice of others simply because it differs from Christian worship. Moreover, his biblical understanding sees the focus of God's anger directed mainly at the failings of the church.

It is the crucified Christ who is able to expose the self-righteousness at the heart of idolatry. Here we see an important reason for Koyama's preference for the crucified Christ in his theology rather than the more positive images of the Risen or Cosmic Christ: "It is difficult to make an idol out of Jesus Christ crucified to whom the cross was a scandal," he wrote.<sup>149</sup> Jesus' life of self-denial and self-giving are diametrically opposed to the self-righteousness of idolatry. Again Koyama recalled the image of the 'periphery' Jesus:

This centre person lived on the periphery. No! He established his centrality by going to the periphery. He became the Lord by being crucified. What a contradiction! . . . It is this contradiction of Christ that can expose idolatry.<sup>150</sup>

The witness of Christ suggests that inner selfishness and a concomitant lack of social concern is the main evidence of a person's idolatry rather than a false belief.

### ***A People-Centred Missiology, Developed through Dialogue***

Through encounters with Thai Buddhists, Koyama was challenged to alter his understanding of Christian mission and to shape it in new directions. The simplicity of lifestyle and spiritual discipline of Buddhist monks provided him with a measure by which to judge Christian missionaries. By comparison he saw missionaries as more attuned to the spirit of capitalism than to that of poverty, and more dominated by worries about achieving success and consequently less free to serve.<sup>151</sup> His

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<sup>148</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "The Ambiguity of History: Help from the Maker of Heaven and Earth," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 9, no. 3 (1982): 152.

<sup>149</sup> Koyama, "Ritual of Limping Dance," 103.

<sup>150</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 243.

<sup>151</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 40; idem, "Participation of Culture," 221-222.

attempt to share the gospel with a Buddhist woman dying of cancer was also a formative experience. She rejected his efforts, saying that she preferred the comforting words of Buddhist monks who at least spoke her own language clearly. Koyama, though, understood that the real issue was not one of language but rather her feeling that she was being treated as an object of conversion. He wrote, "She was annoyed at me for looking at her *in my own terms*. She felt that she was only an object of my religious conquest."<sup>152</sup> He sensed that many Buddhists felt similarly when confronted by Christian missionaries: their real needs and desires, their personal history and relationships to others and their culture, were all lost on the missionary whose overriding aim was conversion. He proposed a new missiology that recognised Buddhist disquiet over the confrontational approach of missionaries and their strong dogmatic assertions. Instead he spoke of the need for "neighbor-ology,"<sup>153</sup> where the emphasis was on understanding and relating to the Buddhists and their needs. 'Neighbor-ology' stressed listening and service, rather than proclamation and confrontation, and was according to Koyama "the best vessel to convey Christ" in the Buddhist setting.<sup>154</sup> He thus moulded his missionary approach on Buddhist culture, which valued a truth lived more than a truth proclaimed.

From early encounters in Thailand up until the present, Koyama has argued that Christians should relate to the person first and only then to his/her religion. "*Ism* and *ist* are related," he claimed, "Don't let *ism* walk alone!"<sup>155</sup> To give primacy to people was for him a theological turning point that he came to through encounters as with the woman with cancer and friendships with Buddhists. He no longer prejudged people because of their religious affiliation and he was kept humble by recognising that his human longings and failings were reflected in the Buddhist as well. Indeed, he argued that a motivating factor in the condemnation of others' religious beliefs was to hide an unwillingness to recognise human similarities:

In the people of other religions, we see, to our embarrassment, undesirable parts of ourselves. This may be one of the reasons why we hate other religions.<sup>156</sup>

The "methodological suggestion"<sup>157</sup> of giving primacy to people is, in his opinion, in keeping with God's perspective where religious affiliation is of secondary

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<sup>152</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Prelude to a 'Neighbor-ology': Confessing the Faith in Thailand Today. Part of the Evangelistic Situation," *SEAJT* 8, nos. 1 & 2 (1966): 172.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>155</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 132.

<sup>156</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Extend Hospitality to Strangers - A Missiology of Theologia Crucis," *IRM* 82, no. 327 (1993): 291.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.



importance to the person's inner heart. It shifts evangelism and dialogue away from a fixation with doctrinal matters to a more humane approach and ethical concern, where the real needs of people are uppermost. Koyama is not against Christian proclamation here. "It is imperative for Christians to publicly state what they believe,"<sup>158</sup> he affirmed. However, the focus is not conversion to Christianity, but a sharing of Christ's love, which "extended hospitality to strangers to an unimaginable extent and to an unsearchable depth."<sup>159</sup> His encounter with Buddhists led him to appreciate the implications of this love for the theology of mission and missionary practice.

### ***Buddhism and Idolatry***

Relatively little is said by Koyama with regard to idolatry in Buddhism, though some important issues are raised. He linked the idolatry behind Japanese imperialism mostly to Shinto nationalism. Shintoism, it was argued at the time, superseded the Buddhist religion and Confucianism. There were, of course, many Buddhists who supported the ideology of imperial aggression, but there were some who opposed it. In his estimation, Buddhism introduced a new sense of universalism into Japanese culture that acted as a critique of idolatry. He found this in the writings of Prince Shotoku and said that the spirit of the Prince's *Yuibutsu Zeshin* agreed in spirit with the words of Richard Niebuhr, "Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes."<sup>160</sup> Tolerance and openness to the truths of others, central to Shotoku's Buddhism, was according to Koyama, a force against absolute claims to both spiritual and worldly power. There have been occasions in the past when Buddhism has supported oppression and violence but this, in his opinion, pales in comparison with the violence perpetrated by Christians around the globe.

The seeds of idolatry, for Koyama, exist in every heart and in every religion. The signs of idolatry are human self-righteousness and greed. These, he held, are capable of display in the field of dogmatic beliefs as much as in the abuse of political power or religious worship, but they do not belong to the basic tenets of Buddhism. He recalled how the Buddha upset the social order of his time by repudiation of the caste system and rejection of the sacrificial cult and magical rituals of Brahmic

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>160</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 156.

religion.<sup>161</sup> As well as this he recognised that the Buddha's analysis of human suffering resulting from greed (*tanha*) acted as a warning to idolatrous thinking.

In Koyama's opinion there is an intrinsic link between idolatry and violence. It is, therefore, the ethical nature of a religious concept or socio-political movement that determines if it is idolatrous or not. He found this to be in keeping with the biblical witness and historical facts. So, on a rare occasion where he passed judgement on a Buddhist image, the ethical meaning behind the image was of decisive importance. Reflecting on a statue of Avalokitesvara with one thousand hands in Kyoto, he commented: "The worshippers of this image are touched by the infinite mercy of the Buddha to broken humanity."<sup>162</sup> Though the *bodhisattva* is a largely a-historical, metaphysical figure she/he embodies ethical value. Koyama went on to reflect:

I am tempted to paraphrase Luther and say that 'if your ethical value is right you have the right God, and if your ethical orientation is wrong, then you have an idol.'<sup>163</sup>

With this understanding the worship of Buddhist imagery is not to be dismissed as mere idolatry in the same fashion as much of pre-Christian worship in Europe was. "In our missiology," he warned, "we must be careful not to imitate St. Boniface who cut down the sacred oak trees."<sup>164</sup>

Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism, then, has shaped his missiology. It gave rise to the idea of 'neighbor-ology' as a more biblically and contextually appropriate method of mission in Asia. Buddhist influence can be discerned here, not only as the primary cause of his rethinking of mission, but as an essential part of developing a new missionary method. In 'neighbor-ology,' praxis driven by humble service is given primacy over dogma and proclamation. This agrees with the Buddhist attitudes of being non-confrontational and placing emphasis on the practice of beliefs. Also, he shows that a positive appreciation of Buddhist spirituality and its ethical content lead to a more tolerant attitude towards the worship of Asia's religious images. He implies that Buddhists and Christians should be slow to judge each other's religion, but quick to join with each other in a common mission that seeks to overcome violence and establish justice in society.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>164</sup> Koyama, "New World - New Creation," 65.

### 3.2.5 The Christian Relationship to Other Religions

#### ***A 'Second Critical Encounter': Christianity and Asian Religions***

Koyama has been widely exposed to the people, beliefs and practices of Asia's religions. He described the significance of these encounters:

Over the years I have been touched by the truths of other religious traditions. As far as I am concerned, this is what religious experience means. Notice that it is not that I touched them; they touched me. I cannot quite explain why and how they have touched me. What I do know is that each experience of being touched has brought a sense of simplification that makes my soul more spacious, and therefore also more free.<sup>165</sup>

It is not primarily because of his personal interest in other religions that they have come to touch him deeply but rather their interest in his welfare and in that of humanity. He claimed that Christianity is involved in a "second critical encounter."<sup>166</sup> The first encounter was with the Mediterranean religious world during the apostolic age. The second is now going on with the great religious traditions of Asia. Such an encounter presents profound and important challenges to Christian theology, so he called for more interreligious dialogue.

God, according to Koyama, has not been absent in the people's lives or religions of Asia. He quoted with approval statements from the Second Vatican Council that recognised the good and true in other religions,<sup>167</sup> and he argued against religious exclusivism. He is, however, unhappy with classifications and theological concepts in the theology of religions. He described terms like 'relative', 'exclusive', and 'inclusive' as "culture- and time-conditioned" concepts from the West that have no Eastern equivalents.<sup>168</sup> They are too neat for his liking and place unacceptable restrictions on God's activity. He claimed: "Often the subtle fact that such adjectives as inclusive and exclusive actually control the movement of supernatural grace has either been not noticed or ignored."<sup>169</sup>

The nature of the biblical God should determine the Christian approach to other religions according to Koyama. The primary attribute of God is love, which makes God mysteriously open and related to all peoples. He wrote:

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<sup>165</sup> Koyama, "How Many Languages Does God Speak?" 173.

<sup>166</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Asian Christian Contribution to 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'," 64.

<sup>167</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Ten Key Theological Issues Facing Theologians in South East Asia," *SEAJT* 15, no. 1 (1973): 3; idem, "Speak My Word Faithfully," *Christian Century* 106, no. 23 (1989): 716.

<sup>168</sup> Koyama, "Theocentric Christology," 38.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

The God of mercy is theologically prior to the God of the first commandment. The first commandment intimates the richness of the mercy of God (Ep 2:4). It must not be understood simply as a principle of exclusion. Theological thoughts of exclusion, inclusion, absoluteness, relativeness, normativeness and pluralism cannot domesticate the mystery of the merciful God.<sup>170</sup>

This mystery is uniquely embodied in Jesus, but his uniqueness is not to be understood as creating barriers between religions. The Bible, Koyama stated, presents a “love of unfathomable depth” that “goes far beyond any comparative discussion of superiority or inferiority of religions.”<sup>171</sup> This coheres with his early understanding that the truth and grace of God are not ‘intact’ in the sense of descending from heaven as an all-encompassing doctrine to be deciphered and applied to the human context. God is rather “in contact”<sup>172</sup> with all peoples in a relationship of love, to be discovered within and through the human context. Humility, openness and service patterned on Christ are to be the attitude of the Christian towards their neighbours of other religions.

It is not necessary, in Koyama’s opinion, to become Christian in order to know or follow God. He wrote:

There is richness in the plurality of cultures and religions in our human world. What happened at Pentecost does not signify an elimination of cultures and religions. It indicates something much more amazing, namely that people who live in diverse cultures and religions can hear about Christ and bow their knees before this particular name (Phil. 2:10). This bowing of the knee does not require that other cultures and religions be eliminated by one favoured culture or religion. The Holy Spirit is not the spirit of imperialism or colonialism. We are invited to bow our knees from within the history of our own cultures and religions. . . . The name of Christ stands more for purification and fulfilment, that is for healing, than for elimination and replacement, that is for destruction.<sup>173</sup>

He stressed that the interaction of people from different cultures and religions means that there is no one pure religion in itself. An identifiable message peculiar to each religion may exist, but religions are interdependent realities. He is, though, eager to

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<sup>170</sup> Koyama, “New World - New Creation,” 61.

<sup>171</sup> Koyama, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” 58. See also, Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 85.

<sup>172</sup> Koyama, *Theology in Contact*, 63.

<sup>173</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “The Ecumenical Movement and the Dialogue of Cultures,” in *Faith and Faithfulness: Essays on Contemporary Ecumenical Themes. A Tribute to Philip A. Potter*, ed. Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984), 46.

avoid the charge of syncretism, understood as a deliberate mixing of religious beliefs to produce a new religion, which he sees as “irresponsible” and to be “rejected.”<sup>174</sup>

At the heart of Koyama’s theology of religions is the impartial love of God and its embodiment in Jesus, particularly in the image of the crucified Christ. It is not belief in the ontologically defined divine nature of Christ and his sacrifice that compels Koyama to have him as the central figure, rather it is the way in which Jesus embodies and practises God’s love that makes him decisive. To believe in that love, argued Koyama, entails that one be open to good and true aspects of belief and practice that may be found in other religions. He recognised that there are tensions within this theology, especially between its christocentric focus and openness to other religions’ truths. He quoted appreciatively from another Asian theologian, Stanley Samartha:

‘In the last analysis, religions should be recognized as having responded differently to the mystery of the Ultimate. While recognising the plurality of these answers, Christians believe that in Jesus Christ the Ultimate has become intimate with humanity.’<sup>175</sup>

As Koyama was unable to explain fully how it is that the other religions have touched him deeply, so he is unable to explain fully how the mystery of salvation in Christ relates to other religions.

### ***Christian Exclusivism Undermined by Buddhism***

In Thailand, Koyama discovered that there was salvation outside the Church. He reflected, “My uneasiness with *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* came with my study of the Thai language. I discovered the nobility of language *extra ecclesiam!*”<sup>176</sup> Buddhist thought and the Buddhist way of life, which shaped the Thai language, confronted and shook his theological outlook; turmoil ensued in his mind. “What had seemed to be my own basis for theology,” he admitted, “had crumbled. I was never again to feel so confident about any system of thought.”<sup>177</sup> He became certain, however, that the kind of exclusivist theology which dismissed Buddhism as of no value was unacceptable. The ascetic spirit and the practice of compassion that he witnessed in Buddhism led him to argue against the Barthian inspired theology that saw religions as mere human grasping for the divine. He recognised that there was some truth in Barth’s position, just as he had seen a ‘grasping’ for divinity by

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<sup>174</sup> Koyama, “Participation of Culture,” 228.

<sup>175</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “The Mountain of the Lord,” *IRM* 77, no. 306 (1988): 200.

<sup>176</sup> Koyama, “New Heaven,” 11.

<sup>177</sup> Koyama, “Christ’s Homelessness,” 703.



Japanese people through State Shintoism and worship of the Emperor. However, Koyama argued that Buddhism taught “non-grasping” and represented a profound religious way that could not be explained in Barthian terms.<sup>178</sup> In relation to Buddhist practice, he argued:

Is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners in the name of the Buddha an act of no value in the light of the name of Jesus Christ? Impossible!<sup>179</sup>

This led him, early on, to speak of the “hidden presence of Jesus” working among Buddhists.<sup>180</sup>

The use of biblical passages such as Acts 4:10 and Elijah’s defeat of the prophets of Baal (1Kings 18:20-40), to support an exclusive theology that demanded the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity, was attacked by Koyama. He argued that these and other often-used passages need to be judged in the light of God’s universal love. Instead of these he preferred the texts of Philippians 4:8 and Acts 14: 16-17. For example, he commented that “one finds a great deal of that which is honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious in the history of the Buddhist as well as in Christian spirituality.”<sup>181</sup> The gospel is able to speak through many religious languages, he claimed.<sup>182</sup> With this understanding, formed primarily through dialogue with Buddhism, he wrote:

I decided not to use the language of superiority within the context of theology. Superiority is a cultural, not theological, concept. To say that Christianity is superior to Buddhism, or vice-versa, is empty talk. The Gospel is not to be called superior. It calls us to bear ‘good fruits’ (Matt. 7:17).<sup>183</sup>

Dialogue, then, led him away from arguments about the absolute claims of one religion over another to concentrate more on Christian discipleship and to recognise the good found in Buddhism.

### ***Learning from Buddhist Teachings on Overcoming Greed***

Koyama was embarrassed at the way in which Christians in Asia rejected the wisdom of the Buddha without any knowledge of his teachings, while Buddhists

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<sup>178</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 41-43.

<sup>179</sup> Koyama, *Pilgrim or Tourist*, 35.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Koyama, “Theological Education: Its Unities and Diversities,” 79.

<sup>182</sup> Koyama, “The Tradition and Indigenisation,” 11.

<sup>183</sup> Koyama, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” 58.

accepted Jesus as a great religious figure and teacher.<sup>184</sup> Christians, he intimated, could learn from the spirit of tolerance and willingness to learn from others found in Buddhism.<sup>185</sup> The teachings in Buddhism that convinced him more than any other of its spiritual worth, and close correspondence to Christian faith, were those related to the overcoming of greed. Greed is understood by Koyama to be “the ultimate enemy, the fierce evil-energy, the essence of the unclean spirit” within a person.<sup>186</sup> He was impressed by the Buddhist analysis that attributed human suffering to greed and which spoke of the urgent need to overcome it in order to grow spiritually. He confessed:

This is the Buddhist truth that touched my heart; it is one I am happy to identify with. It has become an important part of my Christian life. I do not insist that everyone, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, has to agree with my understanding of Buddhist truth. The suggestion that greed is the profound human problem speaks powerfully to me.<sup>187</sup>

And later on in the same article he wrote:

I agree deeply with the Buddha that the world is ablaze with human greed. That image exposes the sickness of our society. I bring this teaching to Jesus Christ as I kneel before him (Phil. 2:10-11). I am grateful that I learned this truth from an ancient Buddhist text that is revered by millions of brothers and sisters of Buddhist civilization.<sup>188</sup>

The Buddhist understanding that greed is the cause of suffering and its overcoming is the solution to human ills has had a great impact on Koyama’s theology.

Several of Koyama’s writings are concerned with the significance of Buddhist teachings on overcoming greed and how these relate to Christian faith. He made, for example, an examination of key Buddhist doctrines to reveal the importance of overcoming greed within them. The doctrines of *paticcasamuppada*, *anatta*, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *nirvana*, and the Four Noble Truths, were all found to show that overcoming greed is a teaching of central and decisive significance.<sup>189</sup> Also, he often quotes a short Buddhist verse, consisting of a question from the Buddha and the answer of his disciples:

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<sup>184</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 66.

<sup>185</sup> Koyama, “Theological Education: Its Unities and Diversities,” 89.

<sup>186</sup> Koyama, *Theology in Contact*, 87.

<sup>187</sup> Koyama, “How Many Languages Does God Speak?” 174.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>189</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 112-128.

‘Monks, when one’s turban or head is ablaze, what is to be done? Lord, when one’s turban or head is ablaze, for the extinguishing thereof one must put forth extra desire, effort, endeavour, exertion, impulse, mindfulness and attention.’<sup>190</sup>

The head is ablaze because of greed and ignorance. In Koyama’s opinion, this brief question and answer “neatly summarizes the fundamental message of Buddhism.”<sup>191</sup>

It also creates a bridge to Christian belief. He explained:

The relationship between Buddhism and Christianity is not that of ‘true religion’ and ‘false religion’. It is to do with two different yet intertwined understandings of the history of human greed. God ‘did not leave himself without witness’ (Acts 14.17).<sup>192</sup>

The penetrating insight of Buddhism into human greed, then, is evidence of God’s presence in Buddhism from the Christian perspective.

In many of Koyama’s theological reflections the Buddhist view on overcoming greed plays a part. In particular, it is related to personal and social ethics. This can be seen in one of his own personal reflections where he recalled his habit of touching a tree each morning on the way to work. This led him to think about the importance of marking time and then he began thinking about the Buddha. He sensed that for the Buddha both time and greed were of related importance; time used to pursue selfish ends would bring about suffering. This reflection inspired him to a more responsible attitude towards the world in line with Buddhist thought. He wrote:

Between today and tomorrow when I touch my tree again, I can accept only those opportunities that come to create a new non-thirsting, less greedy, relationship with others and with things.<sup>193</sup>

He also compared the Buddhist view to Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God, writing: “My Master said, I remember, seek the kingdom of God and all shall be added. He did not say to seek all these things and the kingdom shall be mine.”<sup>194</sup> In relation to social ethics, Koyama explained that “social injustice and unrighteousness, according to the Buddha’s teaching, derive from human greed.”<sup>195</sup> He argued that the Buddha would have agreed with the Hebrew prophets in their condemnation of injustice and that present day Buddhists were doing God’s will in their efforts to overcome greed:

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<sup>190</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 39. This is the “ancient Buddhist text” referred to by Koyama on page 94 of this thesis where he learned about the Buddhist insight into greed.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>192</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 128.

<sup>193</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 15.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 121.

In ancient times yet after the time of Micah, the Buddha of India preached on the elimination of human greed as a fundamental requirement for human salvation. He would be in deep agreement with Micah who denounced the economic deceivers and exploiters. . . . Thus, at the crucial point of critique of human greed in the present day three hundred million followers of the Buddha would (unknowingly) agree with (come to) the ways of the Lord.<sup>196</sup>

In the area of ethics, then, Koyama sensed that there was much agreement between Buddhism and Christianity because of the recognised need to overcome greed.

The Buddhist view on greed also enabled Koyama to criticise Western civilisation and Christian missions, providing him with a new tool by which to interpret history. After noting that the Western Christian conception of history is linear he went on to say:

It is customary to associate a linear interpretation of history with purposefulness while the circular concept of history suggests blindness. The linear symbol has also been appropriated by psychology to represent confrontation and self-assertion. The study of Buddhism has made me aware of a subtle inner connection between purposefulness and greediness. I am not saying that purposefulness always means greediness, but I am suggesting that purposefulness can be an expression of our greediness. Is not there a subtle linkage between purposefulness and imperialism? Just briefly, we can cite the Crusades, the White Man's Burden of the British and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny of the United States.<sup>197</sup>

Buddhism, then, with its many treatises on the complex workings of the mind and the seriousness with which it takes greed, is seen to provide insight into people's inner motivation and, by extension, into the mind of national pride and prejudice. Koyama is better able to judge Christian history by means of Buddhist discernment.

However, despite the influence that the Buddhist view on greed has had upon Koyama and his theological outlook, it would be wrong to infer that he accepts the Buddhist understanding without qualification. He realises that greed in Buddhism is believed to come from ignorance, not the rebellious will as in Christian thought. The fact that Buddhism comes to a profound perception of the role of greed in causing human suffering without reference to God, is seen as a major challenge to Christian theology. But Koyama still takes issue with central aspects of Buddhist doctrine underlying the Buddhist perception. Ultimately in Buddhism, he was aware, greed is understood to be rooted in the person's attachment to 'self'. Cravings and desires that

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<sup>196</sup> Koyama, "The Mountain of the Lord," 196-197.

<sup>197</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 219-220.

lead to suffering are understood to come about, at the deepest level, because a person is attached to the idea of a permanent self within, which leads to selfishness. The doctrine of *anatta* says there is no permanent 'self'; it is an illusion to be overcome by a combination of insight into the impermanent nature of all things and an ascetic discipline to combat greed. Koyama argued that the Christian perception of 'self' is radically different from the Buddhist one. He claimed that "God tries to effect an extreme opposite of *anatta*, the *resurrection of the self*!"<sup>198</sup> Recognising fundamental philosophical differences, however, did not stop him from showing appreciation for Buddhist teachings. Commenting on *nirvana*, he wrote:

*Nirvana*, the state of 'the flame of greed blown out' is salvation. It is the state of absolute tranquillity. It is undecaying. Personally I have no way of appreciating *nirvana*. How do I feel when I go into the realm of absolute tranquillity? But I am interested to see 'the flame of greed blown out' while we are living here and now. Struggle against our greediness is a frustrating, yet vitally important, undertaking. I appreciate the universalism and realism of Buddhism.<sup>199</sup>

Serious doctrinal differences remain but these do not cloud Koyama's gratitude towards the spiritual insight and practical worth of Buddhist teaching.

Being confronted by the richness of Buddhist culture, learning to appreciate its ascetic spirit and concern for mercy, and assimilating insights from Buddhist teachings on greed – all of these factors in Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism have contributed to his understanding that Buddhism is a religion of great worth that stands in close relationship to Christian faith. To make theological sense of this relationship, Koyama turned again to the crucified Jesus.

### ***The Crucified Jesus, A Theological Bridge to Buddhism***

There is no such thing as a pure religion in Koyama's opinion, especially in Asia. When Asians convert to Christianity they bring with them their own spiritual heritage from other traditions. This opens up the possibility for contextualisation of the gospel, as well as for the development of theology in new directions as it enters into dialogue. He warned that it would be wrong to prejudge Buddhism by a simplistic use of Christian categories alone. The Buddha after all, Koyama stated, lived in a very different social and religious context from Jesus, even the conception

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<sup>198</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 152.

<sup>199</sup> Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 125.



of God differed markedly from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.<sup>200</sup> Nonetheless, borrowing a term associated with Mircea Eliade, Koyama contended that there was a “hierophany,”<sup>201</sup> a manifestation of the sacred, within the Buddha’s experience of enlightenment that represented a unique combination of human reason with mystical insight.

Despite the many similarities that Koyama discovered between Buddhism and Christianity, he also pointed to significant differences that could not be glossed over. Hierophany notwithstanding, the nature of the Buddha’s enlightenment is considered to differ from the salvation offered in Christ. The mind of God is, according to Koyama, “far from the Eastern ideal of *nirvana*, the condition of absolute tranquillity.”<sup>202</sup> Even in the practice of compassion, as noted earlier, he perceived a depth and focus in the sacrifice of Jesus that was missing in the Buddha. He does not, therefore, advocate a smoothing over of differences in order to create a false harmony, though he does advocate more study and dialogue to understand better the extent of the differences.

Given the similarities and differences that Koyama detected between the two religions, it is no surprise to hear him say early on of Buddhists, “I cannot define where they stand in relation to Jesus Christ.”<sup>203</sup> He used the biblical story of Peter’s denial of Jesus to explain how he could begin to understand the relationship. As Peter’s denial of Jesus in the passion narrative did not destroy their overall relationship, so similarly the Buddhist who rejects Christian claims for Jesus may still remain in a relationship with him.<sup>204</sup> The initiative for this relationship, Koyama held, came from God’s side. That a relationship does exist is evidenced most clearly in the merciful acts of Buddhists and their insight into the problem of greed, which he can only understand as coming from God. Therefore he ventured to speak of Christ’s hidden presence in Buddhism and was appreciative of inclusivist theological trends in documents of the Second Vatican Council. Here a tension emerges in Koyama’s theology between his desire to be non-judgmental, in order to be humble and act against the self-righteous attitudes adopted by Christian missionaries, and his belief in the decisive nature of God’s love in Christ for all. He recognised that

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<sup>200</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 78-79.

<sup>201</sup> Koyama, “The Role of Translation,” 96.

<sup>202</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “They are a Stiff-Necked People,” *Christian Century* 106, no. 25 (1989): 779.

<sup>203</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 66.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67. This image is then applied to other religions.

Buddhists would resent being called, in Karl Rahner's terms, 'anonymous Christians.'<sup>205</sup> On the other hand he wrote:

Without being imperialistic, God knows the Buddhist languages and cultures. Thus God is able to genuinely communicate with the three-hundred-fifty million people of Buddhist culture.<sup>206</sup>

So it seems Koyama is forced into using inclusivist language, but always stressing the need for this to be done in a spirit of humility.

It is Christ alone who knows the true nature of the relationship with Buddhism in Koyama's opinion. The only way Christians can come to a deeper knowledge of this relationship is through following Christ in his way of self-giving and self-denial. This emphasis on discipleship by Koyama also shapes his approach to interreligious dialogue with Buddhists and others. In his writings, the kind of dialogue he advocates is not primarily that of study and discussion. For genuine dialogue to take place he holds that Christians must adopt a humble interior attitude, reflecting a desire to overcome self-righteousness and greed, and combine this with a commitment to the poor and marginalised living on the peripheries of society. He also called on Christians to be aware of theological self-righteousness in their dialogue with others and to avoid giving absolute authority to religious doctrines. All of this appears to derive ultimately from his belief in the radical nature of God's love, which is unfathomable in depth, powerfully transforming, yet self-effacing. This love is conceived not as a religious ideal or doctrine but as a reality to be lived that brings about interior wisdom and social transformation. "Deep knowledge comes from intense love," he wrote.<sup>207</sup> The paradox of this passionate and powerful love, as seen in Jesus, is that it is found in self-denial and self-giving, in a theology of the cross. It is by living according to this theology, he believes, that added depth will be given to interreligious dialogue and may even cause Christian participants to see theological debates about religions in a new light. He wrote:

What would Jesus Christ of the holy communion - the one who has gone to the utter periphery - say about the soteriology of the Buddha or Muhammad? This is the question that faces us. We cannot answer this until we concretely, in our life, go to the periphery. '... let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Matt. 16:24). Only in the periphery one may have something to

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<sup>205</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 255. For Rahner's thesis that people of other religions can be described as anonymous Christians see Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations, Volume Five: Later Writings* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 115-134.

<sup>206</sup> Koyama, "How Many Languages Does God Speak?" 170-171.

<sup>207</sup> Koyama, "Jesus Christ Who Has Gone," 104.

say about the plurality of truths. Or, in the periphery we may find that our way of formulating the question of 'plurality of truths' may not, after all, be important.<sup>208</sup>

In the end what matters to God, according to Koyama, is not Buddhism but Buddhists - the direction of their inner heart and the fruit of their spiritual labour in service to other people. He saw God as drawing Buddhists to Godself through the practice of self-denial and self-giving, which stand at the centre of the mystery of God's love.<sup>209</sup> There is evidence of this mystery in the teaching and practice of Buddhism, he counselled, from which Christians would do well to learn. Yet for him, the heart and focus of this mystery is found in God's passionate love for humanity through Jesus Christ. An illustration of how he is able to remain centred in Christian faith yet incorporate Buddhist insights into his theological discourse is provided by one of his reflections. Wrestling to understand the destruction perpetrated by and visited upon Japan in the Second World War, he wrote:

I do have reservations about the working of karman but in a general sense, that judgement will eventually come to the doers of evil seems to be true, even though in the 'meantime' great harm can be done. I accept the view of Jeremiah that it is not blind fate or military accidents that destroyed Japan but some serious 'theological' dimension, even though I cannot quite describe it. Most directly and with least trouble in terms of my understanding, I can accept the Buddha's view, which is that it is greed that destroyed Japan. Although in closer reflection, why greed brings forth destruction is not self-evident. These three interpretations are not unrelated in my mind. I see the first and the third in the light of the second. And that gives me richer meaning to the second and at the same time to the first and the third.<sup>210</sup>

There is here an interplay of Buddhist and Christian views. Buddhist teachings are seen to deepen the biblical view, but it is the biblical that provides the framework for an overall understanding. Moving beyond this particular reflection, for Koyama it is Christ's suffering love that provides ultimate meaning and depth to this framework.

Koyama's encounter with Buddhism, then, has had a profound influence on his theology of religions. From what appears an exclusivist position he has moved to recognise that there is salvation outside Christianity, largely because of his recognition of the compassion he found practised in Buddhism and the spiritual insights he found within its teachings. The way in which he has critically integrated

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 68. This is also considered true for religions other than Buddhism.

<sup>210</sup> Koyama, *Mount Fuji*, 229.

Buddhist teachings into his theological discourse, especially those on overcoming greed, also shows that dialogue with Buddhism can lead to new theological insights in Asia. Yet Jesus remains the central figure in his theology and he is clear in pointing to significant differences between Christian and Buddhist beliefs. Thus the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity while seen in a largely positive light remains unresolved. In Koyama's theology, Jesus creates a bridge to providing an answer to this mystery by approaching the relationship not as a doctrinal debate but as a dialogue characterised by self-giving and self-denial. As such the relationship remains a mystery within the greater mystery of God's love. The best approach for Christians to understand this relationship, according to Koyama, is through a sincere dialogue, founded upon self-denial and self-giving in Christian discipleship.

### **3.3 Summary of the Dialogue with Buddhism**

As shown in the above study of Koyama's theology, the breadth and depth of his dialogue with Buddhism is impressive. The dialogue was perhaps at its most intense during his stay in Thailand and in the years that immediately followed when he worked in South East Asia. However, as he moved out of the immediate Buddhist context he continued the dialogue and gave greater time to reflection on the Mahayana tradition, which he recognised as having been a major cultural influence in his own life. Buddhism, then, has been a constant dialogue partner that continues to challenge and inform his theological discourse up until the present.

Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism has affected his theology in a number of ways and to varying degrees. His recognition of the central role played by self-denial in Buddhism feeds into his theology of the cross and the significance therein accorded to discipleship. It also contributed to his criticisms of Western missions and the Western over-emphasis in Christian theology on a dogmatic approach. In the area of contextualisation, his dialogue impressed upon him the need to appropriate Buddhist concepts and its praxis-orientated methodology in order to communicate the gospel better to Buddhists. It made him aware of the subtle interplay of Buddhist and Christian beliefs operating in the lives of Christian converts. Eventually, he came to recognise that such interplay opened up the possibility for fresh developments in Christian life and theology through integrating aspects of Buddhist teachings and practice. His own theology, through appropriation of Buddhist teachings on self-

denial and the overcoming of greed, bears witness to the beginnings of such new and self-conscious developments.

Encounters with practising Buddhists also left their mark on Koyama's theology. Their ethical orientation caused him to reassess and reject the commonly held belief that Buddhism represented an otherworldly religious tradition uninterested in historical change. Indeed he contrasted the ethically concerned Buddhist way of life with the questionable lifestyle and theology of Christian missionaries. It was, in addition, crucial to his arguments against exclusivism; with the display of compassion in Buddhism seen as a reflection of God's loving presence. Recognition of this compassionate heart to Buddhism encouraged him to enter into dialogue with aspects of Buddhist doctrine like *sunyata*, as he sought to understand further its non-theistic foundations.

As well as fostering a critique of missionaries, the dialogue with Buddhism led Koyama to develop a new missionary approach that embraced the Buddhist stress on praxis and self-denial. The purpose of mission was reconceived, from converting others to one of humble service. He proposed also a new understanding of the meaning of idolatry, to be seen as a form of self-righteousness and self-aggrandisement that was displayed most obviously through violence and social injustice. Buddhist worship and beliefs were shown to stand outside this understanding, and indeed to contribute to an overcoming of people's idolatrous ways.

Finally, concerning Koyama's theology of religions, it is clear that his dialogue with Buddhism in Thailand caused him to change radically his earlier exclusivist position. In terms of understanding the overarching relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, he is willing to live with a tension that emerges from the encounter of his confessional stance as a Christian and his exposure to Buddhism as a living tradition; a tension between his central belief in salvation as revealed in the cross of Jesus and his openness to that which is good and true within Buddhism. The person of Jesus is decisive when it comes to judging the Christian relationship to Buddhism but, as Koyama is tireless in pointing out, this decisiveness is based on Jesus' self-denying and self-giving love not on abstract dogmatic assertions about his divinity. The ultimate relationship between the two religions - close in terms of their ethical witness, divergent in their beliefs - is conceived as a mystery in the light of this love. Koyama is, then, able to create a theological space where Buddhism is appreciated; where it is recognised that the Buddha gave his own unique answers to the spiritual quest of humankind that may enrich Christian thought and practice. In the end it is



the love of God revealed through the cross which appears to embrace and give further depth to this Buddhist witness. The Christian, however, can only begin to understand the depth of this relationship through humble dialogue with Buddhists and by following the pattern of self-giving and self-denying love asked for by Christ.

## Chapter 4

### Choan-Seng Song

#### 4.1 Introduction

##### 4.1.1 The Work of C. S. Song

Though based in California for many years, Choan-Seng Song is recognised as one of Asia's most important theologians. He is respected for his contributions to the development of Asian theology and for his support of young Asian theologians.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese theologian, Yasuo Furuya, commented on Song's abilities: "His knowledge and information about Asia, past and present, are so broad that no other Asian theologian can be compared to him."<sup>2</sup>

Song was born in southern Taiwan, 1929, into a Presbyterian family. He witnessed the severity of Japanese rule over the island, which sought to impose Japanese cultural and religious values on the people.<sup>3</sup> In 1949 the Nationalist government of Kai-shek fled to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland and established an autocratic administration, where it maintained its claim to be legitimate ruler over all China. Song was involved in protest against the abuse of political power by the nationalists and supported Taiwanese church calls for democratic reform. In 1971 Song and his family left Taiwan to live in the West, where he had already studied. There he helped to found an organisation called, 'Formosan Christians for Self-determination.'<sup>4</sup> He was banned, because of his political views, from returning to Taiwan until 1987. Despite political uncertainty and international isolation, the country underwent massive economic development that greatly changed traditional ways of life and the national economy.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Batumalai, *An Introduction to Asian Theology: An Asian Story from a Malaysian Eye for Asian Neighbourhood* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Yasuo C. Furuya, review of *Jesus, the Crucified People*, by C. S. Song, *Theology Today* 49, no. 1 (1992): 122.

<sup>3</sup> Japan ruled Taiwan from 1895 until the end of the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> Bosco Cho Kin Wong, *The Transposition of Christ: A Critical Examination of Choan-Seng Song's Vision of Incarnating the Gospel Message and its Implications for Evangelization in the Asian Context* (Rome: Pontificia Universitate Gregoriana, 1990), 12.

After graduating in philosophy from National Taiwan University, Song studied theology at Edinburgh (1955-58). In 1965 he received a PhD from Union Theological Seminary in New York.<sup>5</sup> From 1965-1970 he was principal of Tainan Theological College in Taipei. Then, from 1971-73, he was Secretary for Asian Ministries for the Reformed Church in America. The next years saw him take up ecumenical appointments, first as Associate Director to the Secretariat of the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches (1973-1982) and then as Director of Studies at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Since 1985 he has taught at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, where he is Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures. Despite being based in the West he has kept in close contact with Asian theological developments and was instrumental in setting up the 'Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia' (PTCA). He is also Regius Professor of SEAGST. The above brief outline of Song's career and early Taiwanese experience shows he has lived through times of political and social turmoil, straddled the Asian and Western cultural worlds, been at the forefront of the ecumenical movement, and maintained an active interest in Asian theology.

Song is the author of several books and has contributed numerous articles to theological journals and books in the West and Asia. The range of his theological interest is wide, covering issues relating to mission, political theology, the person and life of Jesus, the use of folktales in doing theology, and other concerns. He is an advocate of 'story theology' where stories from Asia's cultural and religious heritage, as well as from people's struggles in the midst of poverty and oppression, are explored for theological meaning and insight.<sup>6</sup> Like Koyama, his innovative method of doing theology is commented upon, especially the way in which he juxtaposes Asian stories with biblical passages. He advocates the use of theological imagination to open up and engage with people's stories of suffering and spiritual longing, and to look anew at Christian theological motifs and biblical passages in the light of this dialogue. For some commentators Song's approach appears too contrived.<sup>7</sup> Yet his theological efforts are appreciated by many, not least for their "creative *interplay* between story, context and Scripture" that present, in one

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<sup>5</sup> The title of his PhD thesis was "The Relation of Divine Revelation and Man's Religion in the Theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich."

<sup>6</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Story Theology of Birth and Rebirth," *PTCA Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (1993): 3-5.

<sup>7</sup> Alistair Kee, review of *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, by C. S. Song, *New Blackfriars* 70, no. 825 (1989): 148-149; Kenneth Cragg, review of *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, by C. S. Song, *Theology* 84, no. 697 (1981): 61-62.

commentators opinion, “A deeply disturbing challenge to our whole way of doing theology.”<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.1.2 The Dialogue with Buddhism: Scope and Motivating Factors

##### *Discerning God’s Presence in Asian Religions*

There are many references to Buddhism in Song’s writings, especially from the 1980s on. Originally he took a largely negative view of Asian religions, Buddhism included. Writing in 1966 he doubted if Buddhism amounted to anything more than an ethical system. He asked:

When mythical accretions are carefully eliminated from the body of Buddhist beliefs and teachings, how can Buddhism distinguish itself as a religion over against ethics?<sup>9</sup>

At that time he did welcome new theological interest in Asian religions, and recognised the need to use Asia’s philosophical traditions to reformulate Christian theological terms. However, he was keen to warn of the danger “that the uniqueness of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ may be relativised.”<sup>10</sup> It is indicative of how far he has come that some commentators would accuse him of such relativism in his present day understanding of Christ and other religions.<sup>11</sup>

The dialogue with Buddhism in Song’s writings is presented as a mainly literary and theoretical exercise. Despite these limitations he uses a variety of Buddhist sources in his work. Into his Christian discourse he weaves quotations from Buddhist scriptures and parables, reflects on historical stories about past Ch’an masters, gives examples of Buddhist involvement in socio-political movements, and also points to the inspiring influence of the Buddhist way of life on Asian cultures.

It is difficult to perceive Song’s personal motives for dialoguing with Buddhism. Due to the great sweep of his theological concerns and use of stories from a wide variety of sources, he comes across more as a commentator on the vast socio-political and religious realities of Asia than as one intimately involved in their

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<sup>8</sup> J. N. G. Kritzinger, review of *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective*, by C. S. Song, *Missionalia* 15, no. 2 (1987): 102.

<sup>9</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Confessing the Faith in Today’s World,” *SEAJT* 8, no. 1-2 (1966): 103.

<sup>10</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “The Obedience of Theology in Asia,” *SEAJT* 2, no. 2 (1960): 11.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Lucas Lukito, review of *Jesus and the Reign of God*, by C. S. Song, *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 323; Charles D. Gavin, review of *Jesus and the Reign of God*, by C. S. Song, *Christian Century* 111, no. 16 (1994): 505-506.

contextual realities. A few times he mentions a personal encounter with Buddhists, as in a recent visit to a Buddhist institute in Ho Chi Minh City,<sup>12</sup> or speaks of a trip to a Buddhist site, as in his visit to the Borobudur temple in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> Such instances are rare, though, and fail to provide evidence of a significant personal motivation for dialogue. Nevertheless, clear theological reasons can be discerned. These relate to his belief, developed from the 1970s onwards, that God's presence and saving activity are to be found in Asian people's cultures, their struggles for justice, and their religious traditions. Buddhism occupies a special place within this viewpoint. It stands as a symbol of Asian religiosity due to its long history and influence on the lives of Asian peoples. To attempt to perceive God's presence in Asia, then, requires dialogue with Buddhism. This can be seen in the title Song gave to his trilogy of books on the work and person of Jesus, 'The Cross in the Lotus World.'<sup>14</sup> Explaining his use of the term he wrote:

The word "lotus" is used here in a symbolic sense. It is the primary Buddhist symbol - a symbol different from other religious symbols including the cross for Christianity. It stands for the heart of Buddhist faith - the faith that in this world of suffering the Buddha in his infinite compassion seeks to rescue humanity. It thus represents Buddhist spirituality that enables believers to cling to the Buddha for deliverance from the pain and suffering of this world and for attainment of eternal bliss in the next world. This lotus symbol reminds us, in other words, of the world of Asia shaped not by Christianity but by religions such as Buddhism, of the people who are not members of the Christian church but members of other religious communities such as Buddhist.<sup>15</sup>

Motivating factors for dialogue with Buddhism become clear. He wants to bring the reader's attention to the assertion that God has been intimately involved with Asian civilisation and its history, at whose heart stands the Buddhist tradition, and to encourage Asian theologians to explore their indigenous cultural and religious traditions. Dialogue with Buddhism, therefore, challenges Christian theology to

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<sup>12</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Christian Theology: Toward an Asian Reconstruction," in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 62-63.

<sup>13</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "A Theological World of Symbols and Images," *PTCA Bulletin* 1, no. 2 (1988): 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> The trilogy consists of *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1990; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Five Stages Towards Theology of Jesus, the Crucified People: Reflections on a Story Theology," in *ATESEA Occasional Papers, No. 13: Doing Theology with the Festivals and Customs of Asia*, ed. Joseph Patmury and John C. England, series ed. Yeow Choo Lak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1994), 114.



enlarge its vision of God's presence in the world and presents the opportunity of finding new resources for the development of Asian theology.

Another motivating factor in Song's dialogue can be identified in his choice of Buddhist sources. Though he quotes from Theravada Buddhist texts, the majority of sources he uses come from the Mahayana tradition. He has a particular liking for the *Lotus Sutra* and for Ch'an Buddhism. The *Lotus Sutra* is one of the most important texts in Mahayana Buddhism, which has greatly influenced both philosophical thought and popular piety in East Asia. Ch'an is a form of Buddhism that was deeply influenced by Chinese culture and thought. Given Song's ethnic Chinese background it is not surprising that he turns to enter into dialogue with such sources. The implication is that such Mahayana materials are part of the rich spiritual heritage that has formed Asian Christians like himself. To explore the theological meaning of these materials is to return to the religious roots that have nurtured Asian spirituality and his own cultural background, wherein God's relationship with Asian people down the centuries is to be rediscovered.

Over the years Song has changed his opinion on Buddhism and come to positively appreciate it, leading him to make wide use of Buddhist resources in his theological discourse. This change appears to be the result of a growing awareness on his part that God is to be found in Asia's cultures and religions. Buddhism, he recognised, has a special place in Asian history. It has exerted great influence over Asians and shaped the cultural background of many Christians. As such it represents a theological treasure for theologians to ponder.

## **4.2 Theology and the Dialogue with Buddhism**

### **4.2.1 Towards An Asian Way of Doing Theology**

#### ***A Critique of Asian Theological Dependence on the West***

A chief concern in Song's work is for the development of theologies that emerge from the Asian context and speak to it. He berated Asian theologians for their dependence on the Western theological tradition to supply them with tools for reflection and answers to issues faced in Asia. This resulted only in "imitation theology, translation theology, 'discarnate' theology" unrelated to the realities of the

Asian context.<sup>16</sup> He compared Asian theology to the “Big-Bellied Man” of a Philippine folktale, describing it as:

A belly crammed with schools of theology, theories of biblical interpretation, Christian views of cultures and religions, all originating from the church in the West and propounded by traditional theology.<sup>17</sup>

In the folktale the man is forced to work hard and set out on adventures by the Gungutan, a popular folk figure, which eventually transforms him into being slim and attractive. Song counselled the need for Asian theology to go through a similarly painful and adventurous process of change. Part of that process is a critique of Western theology. He complained that Western theologians failed to appreciate the influence of their own cultures upon their theology, and sought to impose their theology on the rest of the world. Thus, they provided “ready-made theologies and missiologies” inappropriate for Asia, while at the same time they were “‘genetically’ incapable of knowing what it means to live in the world of Buddhist culture, Hindu culture, or Confucian culture.”<sup>18</sup>

Song was not always so critical of Western theology. Early on he wrote, “If an Asian engages himself in theological thinking he does so not by setting himself over against Western Theology, but by trying to learn from it first.”<sup>19</sup> However, his opinion changed through a greater awareness of both poverty and political oppression in Asia and Asia’s rich cultural and religious heritage. This awakening to Asian realities sent him back to reinterpret the Bible, to a deeper study of Asian cultures, and to a more critical position on Western theology.<sup>20</sup> He asked:

How did we Christians and churches in Asia manage to believe, theologize, and give witness to the gospel as if resources in Asia did not matter at all? How did we come to think that Asia had no theological meaning in itself, that it had been waiting for it from the West for all these centuries? Why did it not occur to us earlier that God must have been engaged in God’s saving activity in Asia in ways not anticipated in traditional Christian theology? Why did we forget that God is a God full of surprises, a God who does not

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<sup>16</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “A Theological Community with a Cutting Edge,” in *ATESEA Occasional Papers, No. 7: Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in Asia*, ed. Yeow Choo Lak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1988), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; London: SCM Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Song, “The Obedience of Theology in Asia,” 7.

<sup>20</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “I Touched the Theological Heart in Japan,” *East Asia Journal of Theology (EAJT)* 4, no. 1 (1986): 2-3.

always do things according to certain theological blueprints? . . . Why did we not realize that our relationship with God does not have to be a second-hand relationship that has no redemptive significance in itself?<sup>21</sup>

Over the past quarter of a century he has called for fresh thinking and new approaches from Asian theologians, amounting to what he describes as a “reorientation in our theological mind-set.”<sup>22</sup>

### ***Opting for the Use of Asian Resources in Theology***

The great social and political changes that swept Asia after World War II, together with Asian people’s movements for justice and the growing influence of liberation theology, began the shaping of this new ‘mind-set’ among Asian theologians. However, Song reported that they found their “protest theology”<sup>23</sup> to be inadequate when confronted by the religious and cultural traditions of Asia. He described another step that was taken:

Protest theologians discovered the universe of stories and prompted some of them to set out on a journey to explore Christian theology born again and again within the womb of stories in Asia. . . . This is a journey towards a living theology that is to grow out of interaction with Asian resources, not only social and political but religious and cultural.<sup>24</sup>

The primary resources for doing theology would no longer be limited to the Bible and church tradition but draw from the everyday lives of people in Asia. An important development in this new direction for Asian theology has been the PTCA.<sup>25</sup> The broad aim of the PTCA movement was described as “a restatement of the Christian faith and a reconstruction of Christian theology.”<sup>26</sup> To attempt such a radical reorientation the theologians turned to their Asian context:

The key to the question of how, the consultation concluded, was to be found in the “resources in Asia” - resources related to the lives of

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<sup>21</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Living Theology: Birth and Rebirth,” in *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Ten Years of the Formation of Living Theology in Asia*, ed. John C. England and Archie C. C. Lee (Auckland: Pace Publishing for the PTCA, 1993), 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> The PTCA has its roots in the first seminar on doing theology with Asian resources sponsored by SEAGST in Hong Kong, 1983. Choan-Seng Song, “A Bowl of Rice with Green Bamboo Leaf Wine: An Account of the Theological Seminar - Workshop I,” *EJAT* 2, no. 2 (1984): 188. The PTCA was officially inaugurated after the fourth such seminar in Kyoto, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Theological Leap Forward into the 1990s,” *PTCA Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (1990): 3.

people, resources from cultures, religions, histories, in short, resources that reveal the struggles and aspirations of people and nations of Asia throughout the centuries.<sup>27</sup>

Asian theology was no longer to take its lead from the West, but develop through biblical and theological wrestling with Asian resources.

Song had already developed a biblical and theological framework to support use of Asian resources in his writing. He identified the main problem to be overcome as “centrism”<sup>28</sup> - the view that Christian salvation history is unique and provides universal criteria by which to judge all peoples. He argued that God is not limited to the history of a single nation or religion but can be found within all of history. Christian salvation history serves as a pattern that does not exhaust the possibilities of God’s active work in other ‘centres’ within world history.<sup>29</sup> To back up this position Song appealed to a theology of creation. He wrote:

We must learn to listen to the stories of all people. This will inevitably force us to reconstruct our Christian education and theological education on a foundation laid by God the Creator, not by the Christian church as the sole possessor of God’s truth. That foundation is built with the realization that God is disclosed not only in the history of Israel and Christianity, but also in the histories of other nations and peoples. That foundation is built by acknowledging that God’s saving activity is to be encountered in the lives of people of other religions, as well as in the lives of Christians. This is a big leap of faith.<sup>30</sup>

He held also that redemption in Christ was dependent upon this conception of creation. Jesus is the person in whom “the God who creates and the God who redeems become one”<sup>31</sup> and is revealed in history. “That is why,” Song wrote, “history - the history of all nations and all peoples – must be the subject matter of theology.”<sup>32</sup> Behind this is his belief that redemption has been God’s universal concern since the beginning of creation, though it finds a special focus in the life of Jesus. The work of the Spirit was also related to a theology of creation. Song presents the Spirit as God’s active presence and loving power in the life of Jesus but found

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<sup>27</sup> Song, “A Theological Community with a Cutting Edge,” 90.

<sup>28</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God: An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition* (London: SCM Press, 1982): 16. For a more detailed discussion on ‘centrism’ see 131-136.

<sup>29</sup> For an early example of this viewpoint see Choan-Seng Song, “New China and Salvation History: A Methodological Enquiry,” *SEAJT* 15, no. 2 (1974): 52-67.

<sup>30</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Christian Education in a World of Religious Pluralism,” in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990): 177.

<sup>31</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

too in the ethical concerns and spiritual longings of people in general.<sup>33</sup> So the plurality of Asian cultures and religions is seen, in part, as an outflow of God's creative energy and as representing a rich theological deposit for Asian theologians to mine.

The biblical witness, claimed Song, provides evidence of God's presence outside the Judaeo-Christian world and thus encourages theologians in their use of Asian materials as primary resources in doing theology. He refers repeatedly to the Exodus theme and the witness of the prophets, and also to the life of Jesus, especially Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed.<sup>34</sup> Such examples reflect the social and political concerns of God in the Bible, which enabled Song to argue for support of Christian involvement in movements for democracy and social justice in Asia. He also found biblical warrant for a positive approach to Asian cultural and religious traditions. He pointed to Cyrus in the Book of Isaiah, a non-Jew who was loved by God, to argue that within the exclusivity of Jewish belief there were examples of God's favour resting outside Israel. He also highlighted cases from the lives of Jesus, Paul and Peter where they recognised the practice of faith and love in the Gentile world.<sup>35</sup>

Song proposed that the general approach towards people adopted by Jesus should shape the methodology of Asian theologians. Jesus, according to Song, did not define his relationship towards people according to their religion; rather he was concerned with their suffering in life and with their daily fears and longings. Song further claimed:

The presence of God in and with people is taken for granted by Jesus. Jesus' mission is to make that existence manifest and evident.<sup>36</sup>

With Jesus, he wrote, "It is people in distress and suffering who tell us who God must be and what God wants to get done."<sup>37</sup> So, people - their stories, their longings and sufferings - are central to Song's theological enterprise. They have the potential to reveal the presence of God in the multireligious world of Asia.

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<sup>33</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> For example see Choan-Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977): 114-142, 143-173.

<sup>35</sup> For reference to Cyrus see Song, *Compassionate God*, 62-64. For the mentioned New Testament examples see Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 67-98.

<sup>36</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Doing Christian Theology with Jesus in Asia," *IRM* 84, nos. 332 & 333 (1995): 111.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



## ***Interpreting the Theological Significance of Asian Stories***

The interpretation of Asian stories begins, according to Song, by understanding the original context and message of a story. This is then brought into dialogue with Christian thought in an effort to assess its theological significance. Recently he has given this process a clear christological basis, writing:

We must try to listen with Jesus and to *hear* with him, to look with him and to *see* with him. In the company of Jesus we hope we will encounter *the story* behind stories and *the story* in stories - the story of God and human beings engaged in the search for life, faith, hope, and love.<sup>38</sup>

An example of how Song does this can be found in his comparison of the Hebrew creation story with one from Okinawa. The Okinawan God, Amanchiumei, leaves his footprints in creation. This suggested to Song that creation is seen as a continuing force in the lives of people today, which he shows is similar to the Judaeo-Christian conception.<sup>39</sup> Another example, reflected on in depth, sees him reinterpret the ancient Chinese folktale of 'Lady Meng.' The story recounts Lady Meng's suffering at the loss of her husband, who was made a human sacrifice by the Emperor in the building of the Great Wall of China. In the end the woman confronts the Emperor with the injustice of his rule and commits suicide in protest at the killing of her husband. The angry Emperor has her body cut up into pieces and thrown into the river, but these turn into little silver fish through which her soul lives on. Song commented on other social injustices committed against common people that accompanied the building of the Great Wall and reflected on how similar acts of brutality are perpetrated by rulers in modern day Asia. With insight and skill, he went on to relate the story of Lady Meng to biblical events, used it to take issue with Calvin and Luther's theological support of governing powers, and developed a political theology concerned with contemporary issues in Asia. He commented further on the story's religious significance:

With what can only be called deep theological insight our folkstory teller weaves the encounter with truth into an encounter with death and resurrection. And the drama we see here is as sublime as it is tragic, as Christian as it is Asian.<sup>40</sup>

Lady Meng is one of many Asian stories used by Song, as well as stories and quotes from great figures of the past like Confucius and Mencius. He also reflects on

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<sup>38</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Song, "Living Theology: Birth and Rebirth," 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC, 1981): 59-60.

modern stories of suffering and protest in Asia, from a poem of an oppressed tea plantation worker in Sri Lanka to the massacre in Tiananmen Square. Sometimes the story itself is the focus of his attention, as with Lady Meng. At other times a story is employed to support a theological theme or scriptural reflection he is developing, as with Amanchiumei. As well as Asian stories he makes use of others from around the world. The implications are that Asian theologians should not be restricted in their choice of sources for theological reflection and Asian theology should develop in dialogue with the wider world.

The task of Asian theology, as Song sees it, is not primarily to provide a defence of Christian doctrine or to fit Asian realities into an already existing Christian framework. Rather, it is to enlarge its vision of God's active presence in the world and to enter more deeply into the lives of Asian people as fellow pilgrims seeking to overcome suffering, to establish justice, and lead a religious life enriched through mutual encounter. But Song is not uncritical of Asian spirituality. He warned that "it is no longer self-evident that present-day Asia still preserves the spirituality that enables people to aspire to what is good, beautiful, and true."<sup>41</sup> Discernment is required. What he seeks is the development of self-confidence and an authentic Asian voice from theologians speaking out of the theological riches of their own contexts. There is still a long way to go before this becomes the norm. However, over ten years ago at the inauguration of the PTCA he wrote: "At last Christian theology in Asia can claim to be responsive to God's mission and to be creative in the exercise of its responsibility."<sup>42</sup>

### ***New Meaning and Direction for Theology from Ch'an Buddhism***

Song is aware that a meaningful dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity faces serious problems in Asia, principally because of the negative attitude towards other religions adopted by Christians.<sup>43</sup> Over the last twenty years he has sought to break down barriers to dialogue by making frequent use of Buddhist stories, parables and teachings in his writings. In the four major examples that follow he enters into dialogue with images and stories from Ch'an Buddhism, showing that Chinese Buddhism can provide meaning and direction for the development of Christian theology in Asia.

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<sup>41</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Freedom of Christian Theology for Asian Cultures: Celebrating the Inauguration of the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia," *AJT* 3, no. 1 (1989): 90.

<sup>43</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 149.

The first example Song used is found in the title of his book *Third-Eye Theology*. The ‘third eye’ is a Buddhist term referring to a power of inner discernment leading to wisdom. To understand the term an explanation provided by the Zen scholar, D. T. Suzuki, to whose works Song often refers, is useful:

Generally, we are blind to this fact, that we are in possession of all the necessary faculties that will make us happy and loving towards one another. All the struggles that we see around us come from this ignorance. Zen, therefore, wants us to open a “third-eye”, as Buddhists call it, to the hitherto undreamed-of region shut away from us through our own ignorance. When the cloud of ignorance disappears, the infinity of the heavens is manifested where we see for the first time into the nature of our own being.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Song portrays the development of Asian theology as one that is moving from a state of ignorance of Asian resources to one of penetrating wisdom in being contextually relevant.

In *Third-Eye Theology*, Song began by agreeing with the Chinese sage, Mencius, that humanity’s fundamental problem is that of a lost heart. The Bible, Song added, is about God helping humanity recover the lost heart. He then went on to apply the image of the third eye to describe the task of Asian theology:

It is in Asia, if anywhere, with its religions, cultures, and sociopolitical turmoil that God must be working without interruption to recover the lost heart. To realise and understand this, theologians need a “Third Eye,” namely, a power of perception and insight that enables them to grasp the meaning under the surface of things and phenomena.<sup>45</sup>

The third eye, in the way Song uses the Buddhist term, encourages Asian Christians to seek God’s presence in Asian societies, to be sensitive to the “echoes and responses”<sup>46</sup> of the gospel within the religious and cultural traditions of Asia. This will lead to new understandings of Jesus and Christian faith. As an example of this he referred to the work of a Japanese Christian artist, Giichro Hayakawa, whose painting of Christ on the Cross reflected the Japanese culture of *sibui* (controlled reserve) deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism. “It is a *sibui* Christ that we encounter here,” commented Song, “a Christ who does not show internal emotion and passion, a Christ who faces death with equanimity.”<sup>47</sup> The Buddhist term as used by Song,

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<sup>44</sup> Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series*, 13. This is also quoted, in part, by Song in *Third-Eye*, 26-27.

<sup>45</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, xiii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

then, challenges theology to an enlarged vision of God's presence and to make use of Asian resources to express new understandings of the Christian faith.

The second Ch'an example comes from the drawings of Kuo An, a monk artist, who is said to have lived during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) in China and to be responsible for a famed series of ten pictures that depict a cowherd seeking to find and tame a cow or wild bull that has gone astray. Two of Kuo An's 'Ten Cow Herding Pictures' and their commentaries are used in Song's theological writings.<sup>48</sup> The cow represents the mind or Buddha-nature and the cowherd the Ch'an monk; so the pictures illustrate the stages of progress in the spiritual journey towards realising enlightenment. Song refers only to Kuo An's first and last pictures in separate writings.

In the first picture the cowherd is depicted searching for the lost cow. The Buddhist commentary says that the cow has not really gone astray, but humans think it has because "we have contrived against our inmost nature"<sup>49</sup> through attachment to the senses and, thus, become lost in the wilderness of fruitless searching. After speaking highly of the rich symbolism contained within the ten pictures and quoting the Buddhist commentary to the first one, Song went on to suggest ways in which the image can speak to Christian theology today. He compared the cowherd to modern theologians lost in the plurality of theologies. As the monk (cowherd) sought to find the mystical experience of the unity of all life through an inner realisation, Song urged theologians to seek the unifying reality that underlies the many strands of religious thought today. The image of the simple cowherd pointed theologians to where they should begin the search for that unity: in nature and in the lives of ordinary people. Before theorising, Song argued, theologians should listen with an imaginative and sensitive mind that is able to discern God's presence in nature and in the stories of people's suffering.

The basic problem for theologians, stated Song, is akin to the monk's failure to see into his inmost nature. Instead of looking deep within the human person where God is to be found, theologians delight in forcing God and faith into dogmatic formulas. Even "love becomes a dogma that defends our orthodoxy," complained

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<sup>48</sup> A reproduction of the ten pictures is given in Suzuki, *Essays: First Series*, between pages 192-193. Commentary on the pictures is given on pages 363-376. Another copy of the ten pictures, by Shubun of the 15th century, can be found in Walpola Rahula, *Zen and the Taming of the Bull: Towards the Definition of Buddhist Thought* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978): 1-10. Song relies on the pictures and commentary in Suzuki's book.

<sup>49</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Theology that Tells People's Passion Stories," *Theological Education* 21, no. 1 (1984): 12. On this page Song quotes in full the Buddhist commentary from Suzuki's book.

Song.<sup>50</sup> Through this theoretical approach to faith Christians have lost intuitive insight into God's presence underlying the plurality of cultures and religions. Song went on to contrast this with the approach of Jesus: "For him faith and life are more matters of the inner heart than the outward appearance," the "human soul in agony is what Jesus is most concerned about."<sup>51</sup> Song recognised a similar concern in the life of the Buddha and to support this introduced a story about the Buddha's response to a young Brahman inquiring about the validity of the caste system. "Look at your inmost self and the inmost selves of others, Gautama was saying to his Brahman challenger," Song explained, "and not just those external things such as classes, castes, religious restrictions, and social conventions."<sup>52</sup> Returning to the cowherd picture, Song said it taught theology that the unity underlying the pluralistic world is not to be found in some abstract theological system but in the concrete realities of people's lives. He wrote:

That Zen monk was right. The cow the cowherd was searching and searching for had never gone astray. It had always been there. But it takes an enlightened mind to know that the cow has never gone astray. In the same way, theological unity in the world of pluralism has never been lost. It has always been there. But it takes a theological mind compelled by suffering love to know it. To recover that unity, our theology has to be passion theology - theology that tells the great passion story of Jesus in the stories of people's passions.<sup>53</sup>

The Cowherd, then, is used as a springboard to reflect theologically on the task facing Christian theology and the methods to be employed.

The above reflection by Song belongs to the 1980s but in his most recent book he considers Kuo An's last picture and Buddhist commentary. The picture depicts an enlightened monk fully at home in the world. There is no cow to be seen but simply a raggedly dressed monk who, the commentary explains, mingles with common people, especially the wine drinkers in the market place, and bestows blessings through his simplicity and radiance of being.<sup>54</sup> The first important lesson that Song draws from this image relates to the world-affirming depiction of Ch'an Buddhism. This encourages Asian theologians to take their own world, the market places of Asia, as the starting point and main concern of theology. He went on to develop another insight suggested by the commentary, which states that those who wish to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>54</sup> The story and commentary can be found in Song, *Believing Heart*, 18-23.



find enlightenment should “go on their way without following the steps of the ancient sages.”<sup>55</sup> This seems to contradict the traditional importance assigned to the master-disciple relationship in Ch’an Buddhism, which Song recognised in referring to a story about Hui’ko and Bodhidharma.<sup>56</sup> But Song detected an important lesson in Kuo An’s statement, found throughout Ch’an Buddhism: freedom from attachment to traditions and past teachings of Buddhist masters. The Ch’an practitioner is made aware that past formulations of the truth are always limited by the imperfections of human culture and language, and fall short of the experience of enlightenment. Song commented, “The history of Zen Buddhism makes fascinating reading because it is full of stories of enlightened monks striking out on new paths in their grasping for the truth.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, he argued for Christian theologians to give up their attachment to Western theology and to launch into dialogue with the Asian context in an effort to discover religious truth anew.<sup>58</sup> Asian theology is challenged to emerge out of the shadow of Western theology, to engage with its own indigenous traditions, and to seek new theological expressions that break out of the Western mould but that are not bound by the Asian one either.

The story of how Fo-têng Shou-hsün (1079-1134) came to enlightenment is the third major Ch’an resource from which Song derives theological insights.<sup>59</sup> The story recounts how Shou-hsün, frustrated with his spiritual progress, made a vow to keep a strict discipline of meditation until he gained enlightenment. Seven weeks elapsed before Shou-hsün was led to enlightenment, after listening to a sermon by Master Fo-chien and answering the questions put to him by the master. Typical of such Ch’an stories, the conversation between master and disciple is brief and appears nonsensical without background knowledge of Ch’an history. Song does not offer a verse by verse explanation of the story but draws out two points that challenge Christian theology. The first comes from Shou-hsün’s insight upon being enlightened that his prior ascetic discipline was a fruitless exercise. It was a desperate grasping for enlightenment as if it could be attained through the application of a particular

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>56</sup> Hui’ko (487-593) was the second Ch’an patriarch. He cut off his arm and offered it to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch, as a sign of his sincerity and desire to be instructed under him. Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>58</sup> Song also commented on another Ch’an story, the choice of Hui-neng (638-713) as Sixth Patriarch, to reinforce the commentary of Kuo An. Hui-neng was chosen, rather than the Fifth Patriarch’s favourite pupil, because of the insight he displayed in a religious poem which proved a daring ability to contradict and move beyond the Sixth Patriarch’s teaching. Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>59</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Context and Revelation with One Stroke of an Asian Brush,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 62-75.

method. Song compared the grasping monk to Asian theologians who pursue a conceptual understanding of Asian cultures and religions, becoming “preoccupied with methodology.”<sup>60</sup> Vainly searching for the right theological method to unlock the door to understanding Asian realities, Song lamented, theologians become exhausted and led astray. They approach the Asian context as outsiders unable to immerse themselves in its world of theological riches. The second point relates to Shou-hsün’s realisation that truth is not to be understood conceptually but to be experienced in the reality of nature (his own enlightenment was occasioned by a mystical comprehension of ultimate reality in the image of a peach tree in full bloom). Song called on theologians to develop a similar intuitive wisdom that looks to the world around them for witness of God’s presence. He wrote:

No magic can bring context and revelation together in theology. No theological method needs to be invented to test how revelation is at work in a particular context. Such a test is blasphemous and sacrilegious, for God has already united our context with revelation through gravity-bound love: God’s suffering love. Human longings and struggles for grace, acceptance, communion, salvation, and life in Asian settings are the contexts of revelation for Christian theology in Asia.<sup>61</sup>

He went on to portray Jesus as having a Ch’an-like intuition that recognised God’s presence in nature and everyday life, as evidenced by his use of parables. By this Jesus “was to free his followers from fear of their context and to make them realize its revelatory significance.”<sup>62</sup> Song, however, interpreted intuitive wisdom in Christian terms: its focus is God’s presence in Asia, in people’s suffering and longing for justice.

The final major Ch’an example used by Song concerns a story of a public talk given by Master I-hsuan, the ninth century founder of the Lin-chi school of Ch’an.<sup>63</sup> Song refers to a question put by a monk to I-hsuan, after the master’s public talk, that asked him which tradition he was perpetuating. The master beat the monk and at the same time shouted, ““Don’t nail a stick into empty space.””<sup>64</sup> Song saw two

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>63</sup> Song, *Third Eye*, 3-7. The story is also told in Choan-Seng Song, “Christian Theology – An Asian Way,” in *ATESEA Occasional Papers, No. 10: Doing Theology with God’s Purpose in Asia*, ed. Yeow Choo Lak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1990): 25-27.

The Lin-chi form of Buddhism is known as Rinzai Zen in Japan. It emphasises the sudden nature of enlightenment and has unusual methods. There are rapid question and answer sessions between master and pupil, and the pupil is liable to be shouted at or beaten by the master. It has also developed the use of *koans* (unintelligible short sayings) as a means to lead the pupil to enlightenment.

<sup>64</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 3.

meanings in this story with significance for Asian theology. The first followed from the master's understanding that his teaching was not bound by any tradition, as witnessed by his words before giving the talk: "If one is restricted to one's heritage, one really cannot say anything and would have nothing to stand on."<sup>65</sup> The monk asked the wrong question of the master and so was beaten. He failed to see that the master was not bound by tradition; he was in a sense trying to nail a stick into empty space. Asian theologians who perpetrate traditional theology are like the mistaken monk, said Song, they try to nail a Western theological stick on to the cultural and religious traditions of Asia.<sup>66</sup> Following I-hsuan's example, there is a need for Asian theology to give up dependence on Western theology and the denominational and theological divisions it has created. The second meaning related to the beating of the monk. Song explained:

It is the Master's cane that brings disciples to their senses and enables them to realize that truth does not exist outside their daily experience. In the last analysis this is the wisdom of Zen.<sup>67</sup>

This wisdom can also be found in the Bible, said Song, and encourages Asian theologians to seek truth in their own context.<sup>68</sup> He wrote:

It never occurred to us that there is wisdom in the very midst of us capable of echoing, together with biblical insights, the mystery of God's creation from the depths of the human spirit in the quest of the source and meaning of life.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the Ch'an understanding of truth prompts the Christian to seek God's presence in Asia, and invites theologians to use Asian resources in the development of their theological understanding.

### ***Learning from the Buddhist Focus on Overcoming Suffering***

The Buddhist focus on overcoming suffering is a recurring theme in Song's work. In several writings it is shown to have important meaning for theological development in Asia. He quotes, for instance, a well-known allegory told by the Buddha, the 'Parable of the Arrow,'<sup>70</sup> that was given in response to questions put by

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<sup>65</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>68</sup> The words of the I-hsuan reminded Song of Paul's statement to the Corinthians: "I do not box as one beating the air." (I Cor. 9: 26). Both Paul and I-hsuan want their listeners to see truth in the very life they live. Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> The parable is quoted in Song, "Christian Education," 173-174. A more detailed version can be found in Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 12-15.

a disciple called Malunkyaputta on speculative matters such as the finitude of the universe and what happens to the Buddha after death. If a man is shot by a poisoned arrow, answered the Buddha, he will not wait to find out who shot him, what type of arrow was used, and other such matters before attending to his injury. His immediate concern is to take out the arrow and save his life. Similarly, the Buddha cautioned, people should not become wrapped up in speculative thought and questioning which tends to confuse the mind and distract from the primary task of relieving human suffering. Song saw a close similarity between the Buddha and Jesus here:

Jesus, who healed the man with a withered arm on the Sabbath, could have told that parable himself. If we Christians are humble enough, we cannot fail to be impressed by the Buddha's teaching.<sup>71</sup>

Song contrasted the Buddha's practical concern with Christians who, like Malunkyaputta, tend to become sidetracked in academic and doctrinal debate. In this example the Buddha served to redirect theology away from a preoccupation with doctrine to be rooted in the lives of the suffering people of Asia.

In another example relating to the Buddhist view on suffering, Song used the Buddha's understanding of the relationship between suffering and *karma* to help correct a wrong image of God. Song argued against theology that presented a retributive God, inflicting suffering upon people because of their sins. He appealed to the example of Job and stories from the ministry of Jesus to support a more loving, non-retributive image of God. Further, he referred to a Buddhist text where the Buddha discussed the nature of suffering with one of his disciples. The Buddha rejected a simplistic understanding of *karma* as the cause of suffering. He stated that suffering could not be fully explained either as a result of one's individual *karma* or another's *karma* inflicted upon the sufferer. Suffering, the Buddha went on, is rooted in ignorance and is a profound matter not easily understood.<sup>72</sup> Song used the Buddhist text in support of the cited biblical examples to argue that a God of retribution is an abhorrent concept, alien to both true Christian faith and Buddhist belief.

Song is also aware that the Buddha's teaching on suffering has been translated into a practical concern throughout Asian history. This is seen in a story he quotes showing an early Buddhist interest in women's liberation. The story is about Li Ts'ui-lien, a Chinese woman of the thirteenth century who returned in disgrace to her family home after daring to question her mother-in-law. Li Ts'ui-lien stood against

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>72</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 49-50. The text, from the *Samyutta-nikaya* II 19-21, can be found in Edward Conze, ed. *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (Oxford: Bruno Cassier, 1954), 68-69.

social conventions that placed great burdens upon daughters-in-law, but in doing so brought disgrace upon her family. Instead of committing suicide, however, she became a Buddhist nun. This was an example for Song where Buddhism provided a way out for women from social oppression and a means to “transcend the culture of suffering to overcome it and to attain the peace of Buddhahood.”<sup>73</sup> He further commented:

Is there not plenty of feminist theology in this Chinese folk drama?  
We do not have to turn to the West for it. Here in Asia feminist  
theology has deep roots in the culture of suffering.<sup>74</sup>

Buddhist teachings on overcoming suffering and historical examples of how suffering has been relieved are, then, seen to provide new direction and new resources for theological development in Asia.

### ***The Use of Buddhist Concepts in Asian Theology***

Song provides several one-off examples of how Buddhist concepts aid theological reflection and expression. In one of his most creative engagements with Buddhist thought, he used the Mahayana concept of *garbhadhatu* to interpret the silence of God during Jesus’ agony and feeling of being forsaken on the cross. *Garbhadhatu* is translated as the “‘womb treasury . . . the universal source from which all things are produced.’”<sup>75</sup> Song does not provide any background information to the term but in Buddhism *garbha* translates as ‘embryo’ or ‘womb’ and represents the potential to become a Buddha or the Buddha nature residing in all people.<sup>76</sup> *Dhatu* translates as ‘realm’ or ‘field.’ *Garbhadhatu* is a concept that is used in the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism in Japan.<sup>77</sup> Compassion stands at the centre of this *garbhadhatu* concept. Song described it:

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<sup>73</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 74. The full story is told on pages 72-74. A scholar of Buddhism, Kathryn Ann Tsai, supports Song’s view. She wrote, “The convent provided a refuge from such vicissitudes of life as unwelcome marriage, flight from war, homelessness, lack of protection, or frustrated intellectual ambitions.” Kathryn Ann Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries: A Translation of the Pi-ch’iu-ni chuan*, compiled by Shih Pao-ch’ang (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994): 7.

<sup>74</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 74. Song shows awareness on the other hand, of how patriarchal attitudes in Buddhism have oppressed women. See Song, *Believing Heart*, endnote 3, 321.

<sup>75</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 119-120. Song takes the term from a Chinese Buddhist dictionary.

<sup>76</sup> This is the Mahayana concept of the *Tathagata-garbha*. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 113-118.

<sup>77</sup> In Shingon Buddhism the concept is found in the “Daihitaizōsei Mandala, the Great Compassion Womb Repository Birth Mandala,” where “a moon disk representing wisdom rests on the lotus of compassion and truth.” In this mandala, compassion nurtures the practitioner to wisdom. Taikō



Pity is that womb. Womb is that pity itself, that power of life. What reigns in the womb is silence. . . . It is a silence of pity (*karuna*) that is engaged in the nourishment of the life in embryo. . . . That silence will be broken when the womb completes its task, when the womb ejects that life out into the world. The cry of a new life that has struggled out of its mother's womb declares that the profound silence in the womb is over, that pity (*karuna*) has fulfilled itself.<sup>78</sup>

He then applied the imagery to God's silence at the cross. "That silence of God is like a womb enveloping Jesus on the cross," he wrote, "empowering him during the last moments of his life and nourishing him for the resurrection of a new life from the tomb."<sup>79</sup> God's silence is not to be interpreted as rejection of Jesus but a silence of deep pity or compassion out of which the resurrection life grows. For Song, this "God of *Karuna*" is with Jesus on the cross, providing us with a clue as to where God is to be found today: "in this mundane world of conflicts, suffering, and death."<sup>80</sup> Buddhist conceptual thinking is used here as a tool by Song to explore a difficult biblical and theological theme.

Song makes brief use of several other Buddhist concepts and values to develop his theological reflections. One such is the concept of space in Zen Buddhism. The Zen concern for the spiritual significance of space is most clearly seen in the sparse but aesthetic design of temple yards. Zen creates an empty space full of beauty and meaning, providing "a feeling of emancipation" wrote Song.<sup>81</sup> He went on to relate this concept of space to Jesus and key Christian beliefs. He spoke of the reign of God as "that inner space in your heart where God is present. It is that space in your soul that can contain the suffering and pain of other persons."<sup>82</sup> The resurrection was then described as "the new space created by God for us in the world of toil, labor, pain, and anguish."<sup>83</sup> In another example, Song used the Japanese word *hibiki* (echo), influenced by Buddhism, to describe the task of Christian theology in discerning the "deep resonance"<sup>84</sup> of God's presence in the sufferings of Asian peoples. In their renewed emphasis on creation theology, Song also recommended that Christians

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Yamasaki, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, trans. and adapted by Richard and Cynthia Peterson, ed. Yasuyoshi Morimoto and David Kidd (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1988): 128, 149.

<sup>78</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>81</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 201.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 60.

make efforts to study the cosmological basis to Buddhist teaching where there is a stress on the inter-relatedness of all life.<sup>85</sup>

Recently, Song has entered into dialogue with the Buddhist understanding of life and death contained in the *Heart Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>86</sup> He argued that the *Heart Sutra* does not hold life to be illusionary but recognises that the spiritual and the material interpenetrate each other. This he compared to Paul's vision of the spiritual body in I Corinthians 15, 42-44. The context of this dialogue is Song's attempt to rethink the Christian understanding of death. He rejects the traditional idea that death is the wages of sin.<sup>87</sup> Through dialogue that involves Buddhism, the thought of the Chinese sage Chuang Tzu, and biblical passages of Jesus' encounter with death, he found support for a view that treats death as a natural occurrence: one that recognised an underlying spiritual dimension to life that is not destroyed in death but transformed. This dialogue enabled Song to take issue with the theology of death as the wages of sin developed by Paul that has come to influence Christian theories of atonement. Jesus is seen to have more in common with Chuang Tzu and Buddhism than with the Pauline view on this matter. Song stressed that when Buddhism came to China it was able to assimilate the thought of Chuang Tzu who held a positive view towards life and a belief in a fundamental spiritual self that underlay human existence.<sup>88</sup> Song encouraged Christian theology to do likewise, to dialogue with and assimilate elements of Asia's religious teachings in order to rethink its theological positions.

As shown, the use of Buddhist resources in Song's work forms a significant part of his use of Asian resources to set a new programme for the development of theology in Asia. From his treatment of Ch'an images and stories certain themes emerge and are repeated: Asian theologians are encouraged to be critical of their Western theoretical inheritance and to move beyond it; they are challenged to perceive God's presence within Asia's social and religious contexts; and they are asked to immerse themselves in these contexts rather than theologically prejudge

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<sup>85</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 140. Song quotes from the Japanese Buddhist, Masao Abe, in this area.

<sup>86</sup> The *Heart Sutra* is an important *Prajnaparamita* text. It is a short treatise that stresses the unity of compassion and wisdom, as well as the identification of *nirvana* with *samsara*. For an English translation see Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love*, 366-367.

<sup>87</sup> For the full discussion on death as the wages of sin see Song, *Believing Heart*, 79-103. For the dialogue with Buddhism see, 92-96.

<sup>88</sup> Chuang Tzu, a Taoist sage, is thought to have lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE and to have been a contemporary of Mencius. He is considered the author of the early parts of the book whose title bears his name, *Chuang Tzu*. The passage in *Chuang Tzu* that Song reflects on concerns the sage's response to the death of his wife, where he refuses to mourn her passing. See Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1939), 6-7.

them beforehand. The Buddhist concern to overcome suffering is seen to provide theology with a new focus, one that concentrates on human concerns rather than doctrinal issues. Along with Buddhist concepts it also provides theology with new ideas and materials that can lead to an enrichment of Christian thought and a challenge to traditional doctrines.

#### 4.2.2 The Love of God

##### *The Ethics of Jesus and Salvation*

The understanding that God is love underlies every aspect of Song's theology. It is the committed and costly kind of love for others found in the biblical witness that attracts him most. He wrote:

What is made very explicit in the biblical faith is the personal ways in which God responds to the fear and predicament of a human community. In other words, God's heart aches.<sup>89</sup>

Theology begins, according to Song, with recognition of this compassionate concern of God. History itself, the history of all peoples at all times, is seen as God's "love story" with humanity, and in Jesus this story "reaches its climactic expression."<sup>90</sup> Song places great stress on the incarnation and the cross of Jesus as revealing the depth and extent of God's love. This love is for all people but crucially it is through Jesus' identification with the poor and the oppressed that the nature of God's love - a love that suffers against injustice - is revealed.

Love, for Song, is at the centre of God's relationship to Jesus. He is therefore critical of traditional atonement theories that portray God as an austere and cruel figure demanding a sufficient sacrifice to appease God's wrath at human sin.<sup>91</sup> The cross should not be seen as a device used by God, he argued, but as "a hideous tool of oppression used on the victims of social and political oppression."<sup>92</sup> The redemptive significance of the cross is reinterpreted with emphasis placed on Jesus'

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<sup>89</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 53. Song also employs the Chinese term translated as "pain-loving" to better describe the quality of God's love. Choan-Seng Song, "The Role of Christology in the Christian Encounter with Eastern Religions," in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, SPCK Theological Collections 15, ed. Georg F. Vicedom (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968; London: SPCK, 1972), 80.

<sup>90</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 93.

<sup>91</sup> For his recent reflections on atonement see Song, *Believing Heart*, 90-92.

<sup>92</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Christian Mission Toward Abolition of the Cross," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 141.

suffering with humanity rather than on dying for humanity, where “vicariousness is replaced by identification.”<sup>93</sup> To believe in the redemptive significance of the cross is essentially to believe in the power of love that it manifests and to participate in this through identifying with people in their sufferings and hope for liberation as Jesus did. This identification is an act of faith that reveals the love of God and brings about the hope of new life.

The ministry and mission of Jesus’ suffering love, according to Song, is what defines the ‘reign of God,’ which Song explores through biblical reflections and through dialogue with people’s stories of suffering and hope.<sup>94</sup> The reign of God is interpreted in ethical terms: human rights, justice, and peace are seen to be at the core of Jesus’ message.<sup>95</sup> “It is ethical first and then theological,” wrote Song recently.<sup>96</sup> Sin and salvation are also defined as largely ethical and social in character.<sup>97</sup> He complained, however, that the church had divorced Jesus from the ethical message of God’s reign and adopted a philosophical and over-spiritualised understanding of salvation. He wrote:

Christian theology has for too long forgotten that salvation is a matter of ethics as well as a matter of theology. It has made salvation totally ‘theological.’ . . . But this, in my view, is not what Jesus said and did. In his life and ministry he stressed over and over . . . that salvation is *not* theological if it is not ethical. . . . Too much theology and too little ethics distort God’s saving grace. Theology divorced from ethics misrepresents salvation as a matter of correct doctrine and membership in the Christian church and not as a matter of life and death for people sick both in body and in spirit.<sup>98</sup>

Jesus has become little more than a cult figure, a “truncated Christ,” Song lamented, unrelated to the suffering masses of Asia and the world.<sup>99</sup> The task of theology then is to recover the ethical dimension of God’s love as expressed in the reign of God. With such a biblical and theological basis to God’s love, Song developed his concern for political theology.

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<sup>93</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 184.

<sup>94</sup> This theme is dealt with in detail in Song’s book, *Jesus and the Reign of God*.

<sup>95</sup> For example, see Choan-Seng Song, “A New Journey of Faith: The Ecumenical Task of Reformed Theology,” *Reformed World* 38, no. 2 (1984): 113.

<sup>96</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 42. On the same page he further explained: “In other words, the theological meaning of God’s reign is predicated on its ethical demand.”

<sup>97</sup> For a recent example of his interpretation of sin as primarily social in nature see, Choan-Seng Song, “The Spirit Blows Where it Chooses,” *Reformed World* 47, nos. 3 & 4 (1997): 235.

<sup>98</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 317.

<sup>99</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 16.

## ***A Socio-political Commitment***

From early on Song spoke about the need for Christians to express their faith in God's love through addressing issues of social injustice in Asia.<sup>100</sup> He stressed that God's primary concern was not the church but the world. The Bible, he argued, supported involvement in political movements for justice in today's world by witnessing to "a God intensely concerned about humanity's social and political well-being."<sup>101</sup> The problem for the church in Asia, he stated, was that it had inherited a theology that placed "exclusive stress on the salvation of individual souls."<sup>102</sup> Christianity had been critical of other religions as a-historical forces unconcerned with the social welfare of people, but in practice it had been more a-historical due to its faulty theology.

The church can only become socially relevant, in Song's opinion, when it follows Jesus in his identification with the poor and oppressed in society. This will lead Christians to participate in political movements for justice. Such involvement, he warned, needs careful discernment. It must be committed to using only non-violent means and based on Christian faith rather than on ideological grounds. In common with Latin American liberation theologians, Song also called upon Christians to recognise Jesus' voice and presence in the lives of the poor. He explained:

In Jesus crucified on the cross we behold the crucified people. And the reverse is also true. In the people in pain and suffering, in the people tortured and put to death, we witness Jesus tortured and nailed to the cross. And in this Jesus and in such people we encounter the loving and suffering God.<sup>103</sup>

A "christological conversion"<sup>104</sup> is required, according to Song, to perceive this double reality of Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ. The lives of the poor and oppressed, moreover, become the key to opening up who Jesus truly is. To describe this Song often quotes from a poem, 'The Gold Crowned Jesus,' by the Korean writer Kim Chi Ha.<sup>105</sup> In the poem a leper enables a cement statue of Jesus to speak by removing a gold crown that adorns the head of Jesus. Jesus then tells of his identification with the suffering and struggle for justice of the leper and poor in

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<sup>100</sup> For example, he supported the type of theological education practised at his college in Taipei, where students and staff initiated various social projects with the rural and urban poor. Choan-Seng Song, "Theological Education and Diversified Ministries," *IRM* 56 (1967): 167-172.

<sup>101</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 225.

<sup>102</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 125.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>105</sup> For Song's reference to the poem see *Ibid.*, 3ff. For the poem itself see Kim Chi Ha, *Gold-Crowned Jesus and Other Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 85-131.



general. The crown stands for the way in which the church through its theology and association with power has made Jesus into a kingly figure far removed from the suffering of ordinary people. By removing the crown, the poem states that the true Jesus is revealed through the struggles for life and justice of the poor and marginalised epitomised in the figure of the leper. According to Song, people such as poets and writers with a theological imagination and those engaged with the poor, rather than theologians, are best placed to understand this.<sup>106</sup>

Song provides many examples of Christian social action in Asia and around the world. He refers often to the costly struggle of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan for democracy on the island, which he himself supported.<sup>107</sup> On several occasions he spoke of the witness of Christians against the Park regime in Korea.<sup>108</sup> More personally, he recounted how he “touched the theological heart beating”<sup>109</sup> by listening to a Korean woman’s testimony of racial prejudice and social exclusion suffered in Japan, and how the local Japanese church came to the aid of her family. Such stories bear witness to God’s compassion through which is glimpsed the reign of God on earth. However, signs of God’s involvement in the social sphere are not limited to Christian witness, indeed in Asia the primary witness is found in the lives of people from other traditions.<sup>110</sup> Song’s understanding of the reign of God allows this:

It is a rule of love established in the hearts of people. The reign of God is not a religion competing for influence with other religions; it is the victory of justice over injustice in human community.<sup>111</sup>

So where love is practised, God is present. The image of the lone Chinese man who faced the tanks in Tiananmen Square during the democracy movement in 1989 thus prompted Song to ask:

Is not that man a witness to the redemptive power of life and history? Is he not even for a brief moment part of the redemptive power itself?<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Song refers to the work of Shusako Endo in this regard. Choan-Seng Song, “Oh, Jesus, Here With Us!” *ER* 35 (1983): 73-74.

<sup>107</sup> Further details of Song’s support for Taiwanese independence and his influence upon the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan’s socio-political stance can be found in Philip Yun-Tai Pan, “A Study of Choan-Seng Song’s Christology: An Asian Approach” (Ph.D Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1999) 42-43.

<sup>108</sup> For example, see Choan-Seng Song, “Hope in Christ: Its Authentification in Asia,” *IRM* 64, no. 253 (1975): 10-11.

<sup>109</sup> Song, “I Touched the Theological Heart in Japan,” 13.

<sup>110</sup> Song also gives examples from non-Asian sources. For example, he sees God in the actions of Vodoun priests to overthrow Duvalier’s regime in Haiti: Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 196-197.

<sup>111</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 154.

Song provides various examples of this 'redemptive power' at work in Asia, including frequent reference to the life of Gandhi and the teachings of Mencius.<sup>113</sup> In one example, described as a "drama of the Magnificat,"<sup>114</sup> he highlighted the story of how Indian village women, using traditional chants and ritual, thwarted an attempt by developers to use a herd of elephants to destroy their village. These examples and many others point to God's active love made manifest through the suffering and struggles of people of all religions. They impel the church to rethink its traditional belief that God is found only within the Christian religion, and to contemplate that God may, all along, have had different ways of working within Asia outside Christianity.

Upon the theological foundation of God's love then, supported by scripture, Song develops a socio-political concern as well as a reconstruction of Christian doctrine. People of all religions reflect and participate in this love through their compassionate involvement for suffering humanity. It is possible to find several influences contributing to Song's theology in this area. There are many references to Latin American liberation theology and black theology. His understanding of scripture, especially the ethical message of Jesus, has also been influential. Then there are his reflections on the social, economic and political realities of the Third World, characterised by poverty and oppression, and the people's movements there that fight against injustice, including the Taiwanese struggle for democracy. All of this has shaped his understanding of God's 'heart ache' for humanity and God's presence in the moral forces that work for a better world.

### ***Buddhist Compassion, A Reflection of God's Love***

The aspect of Buddhism with which Song dialogues the most is that of compassion. An example of this dialogue has been noted in his use of the *garbhadhatu* concept, but Song engages with a variety of Buddhist sources related to compassion: teachings, folktales, literature, and modern events. He appreciates that the emphasis on compassion arises out of the Buddhist concern to overcome suffering. He quoted at length the story about how Siddhartha confronted suffering through the three encounters with an old, a sick and then a dead person, which lead

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>113</sup> For Gandhi, see for example, Choan-Seng Song, "Jesus Christ – The Life of the World – An Asian Meditation," *EAJT* 1, no. 1 (1983): 118. For Mencius, see for example, Choan-Seng Song, "The Power of Grace in the World of Religions," *ER* 39 (1987): 53-54.

<sup>114</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 259.

him to set out on the religious quest.<sup>115</sup> And he compared Buddha's struggling with the problem of suffering to that of Job and Jeremiah.<sup>116</sup> To describe the social significance of the Buddhist insight into suffering Song referred to the 'Parable of Me and Mine.'<sup>117</sup> The parable concerns children who argue with each other while playing by a river making sandcastles. One child destroyed the sandcastle of another, leading the other children to gang up and beat him. Then they all became very possessive of their own castles. Yet, when evening came the children lost any sense of possessiveness, destroying their castles before going home. Song commented that "this is a parable of human history, a history full of animosity, greed, and destructive power."<sup>118</sup> With such insight into human suffering Buddhism has spoken with understanding to Asian peoples down the centuries. Out of this understanding of human suffering and the desire to overcome it compassion arose.

The compassion shown in Buddhism suggests to Song a close relationship to the love of God. He wrote:

Buddhism . . . is basically a religion of the heart and compassion. How then could it be totally unrelated to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ? How could we fail to see something of God's creative-redemptive work in Buddhist spirituality?<sup>119</sup>

Many examples are provided by Song of how the Buddha's compassion reflects and reveals God's love. In the story of Lady Meng, for example, he reflected on the significance of her tears for her dead husband and then spoke of how Jesus wept over Jerusalem with a similar heartfelt love, which he graphically expressed with the Chinese term for 'lungs and intestines.' He then stated, "There was a towering figure who was capable of coming close to Jesus' language of 'lungs and intestines.'"<sup>120</sup> This was the Buddha, who Song says, here and in other writings, must have been moved to tears at the sight of suffering humanity in his own day. In another example, Song referred to the Buddha's response to Kosa Gotami's grief over the death of her son in the 'Parable of the Mustard Seed,' commenting:

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<sup>115</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 77-78. Song does not refer to the Buddha's fourth encounter, with a meditating holy man. The four encounters are referred to on pages 14-15 of this thesis.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 123-125. Other texts that Song refers to include those previously mentioned, the 'Parable of the Arrow' and the discussion about the origin of suffering in relation to *karma*. See also his reflections on the 'Four Noble Truths' in Song, *Third-Eye*, 64.

<sup>117</sup> Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People*, 117-118.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>119</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 57.

<sup>120</sup> Song, *Lady Meng*, 42. Song makes great use of short Chinese sayings throughout his writings to add more colour and depth to his theological discourse.

Here we are in the presence of a deeply compassionate soul in communion with the God of love. And here in the voice of the grieving master one hears the voice of God in anguish.<sup>121</sup>

Also, Song sought to explicate the suffering love that lay hidden behind the calm exterior of the Buddha depicted in statues. Recalling a visit to the ancient temple at Borobudur, and his thoughts when seeing the last remaining Buddha statue at the top of the monument, he wrote:

How much woe and joy, how much despair and aspiration, of these fellow human beings of his he has absorbed into his body, soul and mind! . . . His whole frame, though maintaining supreme serenity, has contained the suffering and pain of those men and women who come to him for rescue from the miseries of life and for liberation from the tyranny of death.<sup>122</sup>

The Buddha portrayed by Song is a man of great compassion.

Mahayana texts and stories serve as important resources for Song to equate Buddhist compassion with the love of God. In several places, for example, he refers to the 'Parable of the Lost Son' from the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>123</sup> The parable is recited by four of the Buddha's disciples as a way of thanking the Buddha for leading them to a deeper knowledge of wisdom. They compare themselves to a son who leaves home for many years and experiences terrible poverty. Later on he chances upon his father's house but fails to recognise his father, due in part to the father's great wealth amassed in his absence. The parable proceeds to tell how over a period of many years the father uses various means to gain the son's confidence. Only when the father grows old and weakens does he reveal his true identity to the son and passes on his wealth. The father is of course the Buddha, who by various 'skilful means' (*upaya kausalya*) has led the disciples to wisdom.<sup>124</sup> For Song this parable reveals the compassion of the Buddha, which he compared to Jesus' 'Parable of the Prodigal Son.' Song commented:

These two parables from different cultural backgrounds and religious traditions show us how a parable is to be interpreted. They

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<sup>121</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 138. The parable is explained on page 81 of this thesis.

<sup>122</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "A Theological World of Symbols and Images," 5-6.

<sup>123</sup> For the full text of the 'Parable of the Lost Son' see Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 80-96.

<sup>124</sup> Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on the exercise of 'skilful means' (Sanskrit: *upaya kausalya*). By this the buddhas and *bodhisattvas* seek to lead all people to enlightenment. The 'skilful means' employed are suited to the varying temperaments and religious understandings of people. Mahayana Buddhism argued that Theravada teachings were a 'skilful means' offered by the Buddha to those of a lower spiritual awareness, as a preparation for the profounder truths found in the Mahayana. This teaching also explains why there are so many different Mahayana schools – they each use 'skilful means' best suited to the spiritual development of their respective followers.

tell us that life – that is, the life we live in human community – is possible because of the power of love at work in it.<sup>125</sup>

The same parable is cited as an example of the *bodhisattva* ideal in Buddhism. As suffering leads to the cross in Christianity, Song stated, so “in Buddhism suffering gives rise to the Bodhisattva consumed with compassion for suffering humanity.”<sup>126</sup> He refers often to the compassion of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Quoting the following words about Avalokitesvara from the *Lotus Sutra*, he sensed the voice of God behind the *bodhisattva* concern for human suffering:

The living, crushed and harassed,  
Oppressed by Countless pains;  
The Bodhisattva,  
    Regarder of the Cries of the World...  
Can save such a suffering world.<sup>127</sup>

Song sees the *bodhisattvas* as “messengers of faith, hope, and love” who have a “loving and compassionate heart that unlocks the secret ways of God with all creatures.”<sup>128</sup> A reference to Avalokitesvara in a later writing led Song to conclude, “Pity (*karuna*) is the heart of Buddhist spirituality.”<sup>129</sup> For Song, this compassionate heart in Buddhism and the inspiration it gives to Buddhists is a “re-incarnation” of the values and love that Jesus stood and died for.<sup>130</sup>

Folktales about Buddhist compassion are another resource with which Song dialogues. This is seen in ‘The Kannon who Substituted,’ a Japanese folktale about a woman who goes to worship Bodhisattva Kannon each day at a mountain shrine.<sup>131</sup> Her jealous husband grew suspicious of her daily pilgrimage, and eventually he tried to kill her on the way up the mountain. But he returned home to find his wife in good health; she said she felt a blow but was unaware of what had happened. The next day the husband followed a trail of blood from where he had hit his wife going up the mountain. At the end of the trail he saw the statue of Kannon but with a scar on the shoulder, the same place where he thought he had struck his wife. Song commented:

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<sup>125</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 51.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>127</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 167. ‘Regarder of the Cries of the World’ is one way of translating the name Avalokitesvara. For an English translation of the chapter in the *Lotus Sutra* that speaks of Avalokitesvara see, Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 298-306.

<sup>128</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 189.

<sup>129</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 118.

<sup>130</sup> Song, “Living Theology: Birth and Rebirth,” 19.

<sup>131</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 168-172. Kannon is the Japanese name for Avalokitesvara.



Kuan-yin symbolizes the spirituality of compassion deeply embedded in cultures of East Asia. One cannot truly understand those cultures apart from this spirituality.<sup>132</sup>

The story led Song to reflect on the compassionate and sensitive nature of East Asian peoples, hidden by a calm exterior and symbolised by the tranquil images of the Buddha. He wrote, "Until we are able to stare at the serene face of a Buddha statue and see tears welling from his eyes half-closed in contemplation, we have not touched the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Asia."<sup>133</sup> In another example Song drew on a fictional short story about the Buddha by the Japanese writer Akitagawa Lyunosuke (1892-1927).<sup>134</sup> In the story the Buddha, residing in a heavenly paradise, looked down to see a man called Kandata struggling in hell. Despite all the evil acts this man committed, the Buddha resolved to help him, remembering that Kandata had once saved a spider's life. The Buddha sent down a spider's thread to enable Kandata to climb out of hell. All went well until Kandata saw thousands of others climbing up behind him. He became afraid that the thread would break and shouted at the others to get off - at this point the thread snapped because of his selfishness. Song saw in this story another instance of the Buddha's immense compassion, and the Buddhist recognition of the need for building a compassionate community. Song also draws on the work of Buddhist artists. For example, he refers to a painting by Toshi Maruki of a young mother who shields her child from death during a mass suicide on Okinawa at the time of the American invasion of the island in World War II. This was inspired by a depiction of a popular Japanese *bodhisattva* believed to save children from the fires of hell. This for Song is an example of "God's saving grace."<sup>135</sup> Such stories reflect the love of God in Buddhist expression.

### ***The Buddhist Social Concern***

Song is appreciative of how Buddhist compassion has inspired a socio-ethical concern in Asian history. He recognised, for example, that Buddhism provided hope and meaning to the Chinese people during the most violent and uncertain times at the end of the Han dynasty.<sup>136</sup> He also showed awareness, as previously mentioned, of the ways in which Buddhist convents acted in Chinese culture as sanctuaries for women, giving them the possibility of new life outside the confines of patriarchal

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 170. Kuan-yin is the Chinese name for Avalokitesvara.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 133-135.

<sup>135</sup> Song, "The Power of Grace," 55.

<sup>136</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 187-188. The Han Dynasty lasted from 206 BCE – 201 CE.

family traditions.<sup>137</sup> In today's world he points to the Dalai Lama as an example of a Buddhist leader exercising impressive moral leadership.<sup>138</sup>

Modern history provides Song with his most often cited example of Buddhist compassion in action, the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhists during the Vietnam War. Their self-sacrifice in order to end the war "partook of the redeeming power of God in Vietnam" said Song.<sup>139</sup> "The monk who practised this kind of love," he further commented, "must have been close to the heart of God."<sup>140</sup> He recalled a visit to Ho Chi Minh City and the place where a nun burned herself to death. Feeling moved, he remembered the vow that *bodhisattvas* make to save all living beings from suffering and reflected:

I said to myself: Is living theology in Asia possible without those words of Bodhisattvas and without those monks and nuns who lived those words to the full? Does Christian theology in Asia make sense if it does not take into account those brothers and sisters of Buddhist faith who died so that others in their community, including Christians, might live?<sup>141</sup>

The sacrifice of these Vietnamese Buddhists, he made clear, could not be equated with the sacrifice of Jesus, but they enabled him to speak of "redemptive moments and redemptive events"<sup>142</sup> in Buddhism and other religious traditions. Moreover, their self-sacrifice was seen as "an indictment against the brutality and meaninglessness of war" and "a powerful socio-political action too."<sup>143</sup> In his most recent book, Song has reflected further on Buddhist involvement in ending the Vietnam War. He refers to an example of a Vietnamese father who counselled his daughter, who had witnessed much bloodshed, not to exact vengeance on her enemies. Song commented:

The old Vietnamese father might not have been conscious of it, but his advice was deeply rooted in the Buddhist teaching of compassion for all beings, and in the Buddhist vision of a human community in which all violence would cease and peace would prevail.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Song quotes a further example, from a popular Taiwanese song, of how the Buddhist convent came to the help of women suffering under the pressures of patriarchal society. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 149.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>139</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 140.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Song, "Living Theology: Birth and Rebirth," 20.

<sup>142</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 133.

<sup>143</sup> Song, "The Power of Grace," 48.

<sup>144</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 287.

He went on to agree with Thich Nhat Hahn that Buddhist values and non-violent actions contributed greatly to the desire for peace in Vietnam and made it possible for reconciliation and rebuilding to begin.<sup>145</sup>

Use is also made by Song of old Buddhist stories to reflect on the moral leadership Buddhism provides to communities. A story about the meeting of Japanese Zen master Ekaku Hakuin (1688-1769) and a soldier called Nobushinge serves this purpose. Nobushinge came to ask the difference between heaven and hell. At first the master answered rudely, to the point where Nobushinge drew his sword to strike him. Song quoted the outcome:

‘As Nobushinge drew his sword, Hakuin looked right at him and exclaimed, “That is hell!”  
Sheathing his sword, the samurai bowed with great humility and respect.  
“And this,” Hakuin announced, “is heaven.”’<sup>146</sup>

This, for Song, is an expression of the “power of grace - the power of turning hell into heaven - that Jesus had wanted to impart to the men and women who came to him for inspiration, support and help.”<sup>147</sup> In another example, quoted by Song from a Vietnamese legend, a man is about to take revenge on a penitent enemy. Some time before the man had chopped his enemy’s arm off, but when he was away at war the enemy raped his wife, killed his grandmother, and destroyed his farm. Before taking revenge the man hears the sound of a temple bell and a ghostly chorus in the wind carrying the voices of his grandmother, the war dead, and the spirits of his children-to-be. Song quoted the chorus, some of which reads as:

‘We must hurry to become  
Enlightened-  
We must kneel beneath the tree of  
Buddha-  
We look into the face of god and  
Forget the past . . .  
Look into the mirror: see the compassion in your heart.  
Avoid all resentment and hatred for  
Humankind - ’<sup>148</sup>

After hearing this, the man forgave his enemy and thus the cycle of violence was broken. Song held that the man in this legend must have heard the sound of the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 289-290.

<sup>146</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 194.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 268-269.

Buddha's admonition against acting in anger and out of selfishness.<sup>149</sup> The moral message of this legend, he went on to show, was put into practice by Buddhists during the Vietnam War.<sup>150</sup> Song, then, presents Buddhism as having a social conscience and moral power capable of inspiring women and men to great acts of self-sacrifice out of love for their fellow humans. Of this Christian theology must take note and learn.

As in any religion, people fail to live up to the ethical ideal and Song is critical of Buddhists in this regard. He condemned, for instance, Sri Lankan Buddhists for their oppression of the Tamil minority and Thai Buddhists for their toleration of the sex industry.<sup>151</sup> A certain ambivalence does appear at times, however, in his understanding of Buddhism's social concern. On the one hand, he can speak of *nirvana* as "the power of serenity in the midst of tragedies" and "the bliss of peace in the midst of suffering in this world."<sup>152</sup> He takes issue with the Western portrayal of Buddhism as otherworldly. And, in the context of referring to the self-immolation of a Vietnamese Buddhist nun, he wrote:

The pain and sorrow of human finitude are all real to the Buddha. He does not live in a world of illusion untouched by social and political evils. He knows too well how tyrannical rulers inflict suffering upon people. He is not enshrined in eternal serenity that cannot be penetrated by wars and rumours of wars. Contained in that serene Buddha is a heart moved to compassion for suffering human beings.<sup>153</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, he speaks of "the other-worldly secrets of *nirvana*."<sup>154</sup> He also claimed, "At the theoretical level at least, Buddhism is by nature world-denying or existence-denying."<sup>155</sup> A visit he made to a Korean Zen temple in a secluded mountain reinforced this impression. The Zen master of the temple, Ku San, appeared preoccupied with self-introspection and unconcerned about social justice issues. Song compared this attitude unfavourably to the way in which Shamanism

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 284-289.

<sup>151</sup> Sri Lankan reference: Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 158; Thai reference: Song, *Believing Heart*, 6.

<sup>152</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 203.

<sup>153</sup> Song, "The Power of Grace," 49. The Ch'an stories of Kuo An and I-hsuan outlined earlier, which stress that enlightenment is discovered in the context of everyday life, also come to mind here. In his most recent book Song also referred to a Ch'an story that depicts an old woman who has served a self-absorbed Zen hermit monk for many years. She burned down his hut to force him to return to the world and its cares where enlightenment is truly to be found. Song, *Believing Heart*, 104-105.

<sup>154</sup> Song, *Lady Meng*, 43.

<sup>155</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 69.

gives voice to the feelings of the poor and oppressed in Korean society.<sup>156</sup> In other writings he also suggested that the Buddhist motivation for social action was prompted more by confrontation with the social realities of poverty and injustice than by recourse to Buddhist teachings.

Ambiguity can also be detected in his view of redemptive suffering in Buddhism. He indicated that the concept of merit making divested suffering for the sake of others of redemptive significance.<sup>157</sup> Yet, in a later writing he suggested that something approaching a theory of atonement is not alien to Buddhist teaching,<sup>158</sup> and he certainly sees redemptive significance in many of the examples of Buddhist compassion discussed above. It may be that he has come to view the social relevance of Buddhist teachings more positively in later years, but his views are at times confusing. In his most recent book he complains that a simplistic Buddhist interpretation of *karma*, and the significance accorded to withdrawing from the world in Buddhist teachings, have fostered a socially disengaged and otherworldly religious mentality. Yet in the end he agrees with a Buddhist scholar that Buddhism represents a religious move towards a more positive view of engagement with the world.<sup>159</sup>

Reflections on the Buddha and his teachings, Japanese folktales, and events from modern history – these and other examples are used by Song to impress on the reader that compassion is central to Buddhism. They serve also to portray Buddhist compassion as a reflection of the love of God. Despite some confusion as to the historical orientation of Buddhism, on the whole Song's dialogue strikes an appreciative note that recognises the great self-sacrifice that compassion has inspired among Buddhists. Thus, another area of Asian resources is opened up that challenges theological thought and Christian practice.

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<sup>156</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Building a Theological Culture of People," *AJT* 1, no. 2 (1987): 273-291.

<sup>157</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 70. It is interesting to note that some Evangelical theologians working in a Buddhist context use the Buddhist idea of merit to speak about the atoning power of Jesus' sacrifice. For example, see John R. Davis, *Poles Apart?* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, OMF Publishers, 1993): 147.

<sup>158</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 232. His reference is to a work on Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>159</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 122-123.



### 4.2.3 Towards A New Understanding of Mission

#### *A Critique of the Western Missionary Enterprise*

“To be Christian means to be in mission,” wrote Song early on.<sup>160</sup> Mission has remained an important theme throughout his writing. His own theological reflections have a missionary character in the way they seek to convince others of the need to develop more contextually relevant theologies. In a similar vein he calls the PTCA a theological movement of missionary significance.<sup>161</sup> Like other Asian theologians he reflects on mission, conscious of the church’s minority status in Asia despite a long history of Western missionary activity.

In the 1960s Song supported developments in missiology which saw the missionary goal as witnessing to the self-giving love of Jesus for all people, rather than as converting ‘the heathen.’<sup>162</sup> He still held, though, to the conviction that Asian people needed a personal challenge to believe in Jesus for their salvation.<sup>163</sup> From the 1970s on his position began to shift as he reflected further on mission. Influencing him were the immense social and political changes sweeping across Asia, prompting him to rethink mission in terms of a greater social concern. Later on, further insights came from another source - a growing awareness of the theological significance and worth of Asia’s revitalised religious and cultural traditions.

Central to Song’s developing thought has been a passionate critique of the Western missionary enterprise in the Third World, and Asia in particular. Western missionaries, he charged, “were the self-styled crusaders who had come out to conquer and not to reason, to convert and not to listen.”<sup>164</sup> He complained that missionaries in the past relied upon and supported Western colonial powers, thus ensuring that Christianity would be identified as a foreign and hostile religion in Asian lands. He wrote:

And the celebrated Christian slogan in the nineteenth century: “evangelization of the world in this generation” – how alien and how innocent it would sound in the world of ours today in which Christianity no longer enjoys the political and military protection of

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<sup>160</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 234.

<sup>161</sup> Song, “Freedom of Theology for Asian Cultures,” 90.

<sup>162</sup> For example, Choan-Seng Song, “The Witness of Christ in the World of Religion,” *SEAJT* 2, no. 3 (1961): 20.

<sup>163</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “An Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Culture and Its Implications for Theology,” *SEAJT* 4, no. 4 (1963): 22.

<sup>164</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 174.

the west and has to learn to respect the rights and integrity of the people of other religions and cultures!<sup>165</sup>

In many of his writings he accuses missionaries of suffering from arrogance and of treating people as little more than objects of conversion. Asian churches appropriated these attitudes, leaving them capable of viewing other religious traditions only “through the lens of idolatry.”<sup>166</sup> That the vast majority of Asians have rejected Christianity is of no surprise to Song. They saw no need to change from religions that had served them well for centuries.

Song is critical of other effects of the missionary enterprise in Asia. He castigated the denominationalism, church structures, and medical and educational establishments imported from the West that have become burdensome institutions for Asian churches. He claimed too that the emphasis on individual conversion in mission meant Asian churches became isolated from the socio-political issues affecting their nations in the turbulent and critical post World War II period. He also attacked the way in which converts were divorced from their cultures:

Needless to say, such dogmatism and militancy exhibited by missionary Christianity have made the Gospel of Jesus Christ appear to be negative and exclusive not only with regard to other religious beliefs but also to Asian cultural expressions as a whole. Thus, to become Christian is to become uprooted from Asian culture, as well as to disassociate oneself entirely from Asian religions.<sup>167</sup>

Such cultural uprooting, he argued, stifled theological creativity as Christians were cut off from the sources that had formerly given their lives meaning and purpose.

The causes of missionary arrogance are attributed by Song to a number of socio-cultural, biblical and theological factors. Missionaries, he explained, were often the cultural products of Western nations influenced by the colonial desire to rule and civilise the world. Asia’s religious and cultural traditions were seen as of little worth or demonised. From a historical perspective, he concluded that the advent of change towards a more militant missiology began when Constantine embraced Christianity on the battlefield in his endeavour to rule the Roman Empire in 312 CE. The image of “Jesus as conqueror”<sup>168</sup> was born which, he stated, is at the “root of the theological and missiological mind-set of the Christian church in the history of its expansion.”<sup>169</sup> He also argued that the beginnings of such a militant faith could be

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<sup>165</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “Christian Theology after the 4<sup>th</sup> of June,” *PTCA Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (1989): 3.

<sup>166</sup> Song, “Five Stages,” 125.

<sup>167</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 177.

<sup>168</sup> Song, “Toward Abolition of the Cross,” 131.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

found in the New Testament. In the call to baptise in the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel he perceived the shaping of an exclusivist faith in the early church. Baptism is portrayed as entry into a privileged people in fulfilment of apocalyptic hope. This he complained is bad theology, which has encouraged the modern church growth movement.<sup>170</sup> He also argued that the dominant missionary theology that places stress on individual sin and salvation came from the early apostles not Jesus. They were keenly aware of their personal failings in deserting and persecuting Jesus, and so felt they were a privileged people in receiving God's grace. Song argued this stood in contrast to Jesus' missionary theology, which was altogether more ethical and social in character.<sup>171</sup>

### ***Redefining Christian Mission***

Working towards a redefinition of Christian mission was the subject of Song's first major book.<sup>172</sup> The theological foundations for such reassessment of mission are rooted in his understanding of God as creator and universally present to all peoples. Missionaries did not take God to Asians, he argued, since God has been present in their histories, cultures and religions since the beginning of time: "God has the whole of creation to deal with."<sup>173</sup> Song's understanding is cleverly expressed through his use of an Angolan folk story where the brothers-in-law of a newly wed woman refuse to accept food that she has specially prepared for them. This happens several times until the woman learns that it is because she does not know and use their names that they refuse to take her food. Song compared this to missionaries in the Third World who came to convert and 'christen' people with new names without any interest in the names they already possessed. He referred to the meaning behind a person's name and the lesson for mission:

Our own names contain not only our own personal story, our own cultural tradition, our own national history; but the secret that God is with us, loves us, suffers with us, and gives us hope for the future. It is this secret that Christian mission must learn, explore, and disclose.<sup>174</sup>

God is already with the people, and has been since the beginning of their history. To recognise this is the first step in mission.

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<sup>170</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 270-273.

<sup>171</sup> Song, "Five Stages," 127-129.

<sup>172</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction* (1977).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>174</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 100.

From early on Song also sought to root mission in a renewed understanding of Jesus' life and death. The cross of Christ, he argued, has profound implications for missionary practice. It impels Christian missionaries to adopt an attitude of self-sacrifice and humility in order to free them to serve rather than convert others. God, he stated, does not become real through presentation of doctrines or a set of moral standards but through "denial of the self for the sake of others."<sup>175</sup> This Christian self-denial, he urged, must be concretely expressed by Christian mission through identification with the poor and oppressed, including a willingness to participate in socio-political movements for justice. In more recent years he has returned to examine the biblical roots of mission in the life of Jesus with greater conviction. He wrote:

It has finally dawned on me that for Christian mission to be really possible it has to be predicated on our theological enquiry into what Christian faith is really about, what Jesus of Nazareth really did, and why he had to end up on the cross.<sup>176</sup>

Central to his 'theological enquiry' is Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, which is concerned with conversion of the heart to seek justice, love and peace in human relationships, rather than on changing religious allegiance. Missionary theology and practice, according to Song, should flow out of this understanding of the reign of God. He argued against using the Great Commission of Matthew as a basis for missiology and suggested that the Lord's Prayer, where the reign of God is of utmost significance, is a more appropriate text. With such a basis it "will shift the mandate of Christian mission from expansion of its own influence to service of the reign of God."<sup>177</sup> As well as this new socio-ethical orientation to mission, Song asked for an open and appreciative attitude towards Asia's religious traditions based on the example of Jesus. He portrayed Jesus as one who broke down religious barriers, supporting this with reference to Jesus' dialogue with a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15. 21-28). Jesus, who was caught up in his concern for mission to the Jews, at first refused to help her but her (pre-Christian) faith challenged him to redefine his mission to include people outside Israel and to recognise faith outside Judaism.<sup>178</sup> Her witness to Jesus became the occasion for him to "cross the frontiers of truth"<sup>179</sup> and break with the exclusive faith of the Jewish tradition of the time.

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<sup>175</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 60.

<sup>176</sup> Song, "Toward Abolition of the Cross," 134.

<sup>177</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 281.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-80.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

As well as the above theological and biblical reasons for rethinking mission, Song also refers to the witness of Asia's religious traditions as a decisive contributing factor. The fact that these religions did not die out in the twentieth century but became actively involved in national and social issues meant that Christianity could no longer claim to be the only religion with a mission and gospel for Asia. Indeed, in many instances, as pointed out, the witness of people of other religions humbled the churches. In one example he referred to the Australian Aborigines, whose culture and society suffered greatly at the hands of colonisers and their white churches. He commented:

The Christian church through its mission brought to the Aborigines the God who could not recognize their culture, the Jesus who denied their dignity as human beings, and the Spirit who set itself against their spirituality and suppressed it. But now they are disclosing to us the God who created their culture as well as other cultures, the Jesus who is with them in their suffering, and the Spirit who enables them to keep their spirituality active in each of them. This is an irony, but it is also a challenge. It challenges us to reconstruct our "Christian" mission to reflect more of what God has done and is still doing through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.<sup>180</sup>

Christian mission, then, is to be reconstructed in the light of a renewed biblical understanding but also with reference to the social and religious realities in Asia.

In the face of Asian suffering, such as the plight of Vietnamese boat people and the Cambodian genocide, Song outlined the missionary agenda for Asia:

No more division, political or religious; no more exploitation, economic or social; no more discrimination, racial, sexual, or cultural - this is the message of life and the church must proclaim it in word and in deed. This is our mission today.<sup>181</sup>

He is not against missionaries witnessing to their faith in Jesus or of Asians converting to Christianity. However, he questioned if this is the only way to witness.<sup>182</sup> More important is the ethical content of God's reign and the demands it places upon people in their social relationships. Mission for Song "continues the incarnation" which involves identifying with the poor and oppressed as Jesus did.<sup>183</sup> It becomes a mission to "work toward eradication of the cross," which is the supreme symbol of human violence and injustice.<sup>184</sup> The evangelical goal is not to fulfil the

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<sup>180</sup> Song, "Toward Abolition of the Cross," 147.

<sup>181</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 255.

<sup>182</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 260.

<sup>183</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 272.

<sup>184</sup> Song, "Toward Abolition of the Cross," 147.



Great Commission but to realise the new commandment of love in human society. It is to recognise within the struggles and hopes of people of all religions a reflection of God's presence. Recognition of this presence caused him to reflect:

It inspires us to wonder whether or not only Christians have a mission toward other people, but other people too have a mission toward Christians. It also compels us to think out loud whether ours must be a mission with missions of other people within one mission of God.<sup>185</sup>

### ***A Critique of Christian Missions to Buddhists***

In the few places where Christian mission and Buddhism are mentioned together in Song's early writings, he sought to show the latter in a negative light. In one article he wrote that self-emptying, based on the *kenosis* of Christ, should be the starting point of Christian missionary endeavour. Seeing this to be similar to self-denial in Buddhism, he explained that Christians did not seek "extinction of the self" as in Buddhism, but to "restore authenticity to the self" through service to others.<sup>186</sup> Buddhism was viewed as a religion turned in on itself, whereas Christianity turned out to others in need. However, especially since the 1980s, he has developed a more positive view of Buddhism, pointed to areas where Christian missiology can learn from the Buddhist missionary experience, and criticised Christian missions to Buddhists. He also changed his opinion about the Buddhist notion of the self. He wrote, in disagreement with Karl Barth who understood Buddhism as seeking dissolution of the self, "I am sure most Buddhists would contend that the final goal of religion in nirvana is not dissolution but fulfillment of the self."<sup>187</sup>

Part of Song's critique of Western missions includes missions to Buddhists. He draws on a few examples from China and Thailand. While acknowledging the sensitivity to issues of inculturation displayed by early Jesuits in China, he took issue with their view of Buddhism, which they sought to paint as the devil's religion. "Is this not a very poor theology of God," he asked, "giving so much credit to the devil?"<sup>188</sup> With such theology, he said, Christianity could make little headway in Buddhist countries. Similarly, he quoted a Thai Christian who spoke of mission in Thailand as impossible if continued in the militant ways of the past.<sup>189</sup> He also referred to the story of Kosuke Koyama's difficult meeting with a Buddhist woman

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>186</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Election for Mission," *SEAJT* 13, no. 2 (1972): 42.

<sup>187</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 136.

<sup>188</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 89.

<sup>189</sup> Song, "Toward Abolition of the Cross," 134.

dying of cancer, where Koyama's interest was rejected by the woman. Song stated that there was no possibility of a "heart-to-heart communication" between the two because of the legacy of militant evangelism in the past.<sup>190</sup> He complained too that the condemnation of Buddhism as a religion of idolatry blinded missionaries to an appreciation of Buddhist symbolism. They failed, for example, to appreciate the compassion that Asians perceived in the tranquil image of Buddha statues, seeing only an image of Asian impassivity and flight from the world.<sup>191</sup> He has also written about a meeting with the faculty of the Buddhist Institute in Ho Chi Minh City where, after a broad ranging discussion, an elderly monk asked why Christians were so aggressive in their desire to convert Buddhists. "Quietly," Song wrote, "but with pain in my heart I replied: 'Some Christians are aggressive, but not all Christians are.'"<sup>192</sup>

Song's dialogue with Buddhist compassion led him to a further critique of Christian mission. The compassion of *bodhisattvas*, always ready to put the needs of others before their own and to enter into their suffering, is cited by him as an example of how God gives hope and aid to the world through another religious tradition. They are seen to function in a similar way to prophets in the Hebrew Bible and embody the values of compassion and service shown in the Last Judgement scene in Matthew 25: 34-36.<sup>193</sup> The *bodhisattva* understood in this way challenged Christians to a new conception of mission in Asia. Song wrote:

They should see the mission of the church as consisting not of conquering members of other faiths but of growing with them in the knowledge and experience of God's saving work in the world.<sup>194</sup>

He went on to explain:

The mission of the church is the more fundamental task of interacting with the Asian spirituality shaped by Asian cultures and religions with the love and compassion of God in Jesus Christ. In addition, Asian Christians together with people of other faiths and ideologies must seek to transform Asian society on the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 39. Koyama's story is told on page 86-87 of this thesis.

<sup>191</sup> In another example Song compared the lotus flower to the cross as a symbol that also "sprang out of the midst of the daily life of the people" and which spoke to the religious aspirations and daily struggles of ordinary people. Such imagery was not understood by missionaries. *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>192</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Christian Theology: Toward an Asian Reconstruction," 63.

<sup>193</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 135-136.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

Dialogue with Buddhism became the platform for Song to argue for Christians to join believers of other religions in a common mission in Asia. Buddhists and Christians in particular, he pointed out, share a similar viewpoint which enables the envisioning of such a mission. They have “a common entry into the ultimate question of life, which is suffering,” he wrote, “and they share a common duty to go together through suffering with faith and hope in the salvation of all humanity.”<sup>196</sup>

### ***Learning from the Buddhist Mission in China***

In terms of mission, perhaps the most significant lesson that Christian theology can learn from Buddhism is, for Song, located in the missionary history of Buddhism in China. He sees the spread of Buddhism from its Indian homeland to the very different and proud cultural world of China as one of the most fascinating events in history. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism did not rely on military might to protect its advance but came at the invitation of Chinese people eager to know its message. The fundamental reason why this happened, Song stated, was because “Buddhism . . . was a religion of salvation, and what the people needed was a way of salvation.”<sup>197</sup> Moreover, he appreciated that Buddhism’s missionary success was due to a willingness on the part of missionaries to allow Buddhism to be shaped and in some ways transformed by the indigenous religiosity of the Chinese. This happened in the process of *köyi*, a Chinese word referring to the recasting of Buddhist terms under the influence of Chinese philosophical and religious thought. Song described the significance of this process:

Through *köyi*, the method of extension, the Buddhist faith extended itself into Chinese religious and philosophical thought. It penetrated into Chinese spirituality. And this is not a one-way traffic. In turn the Buddhist faith was penetrated by Chinese thought. Chinese ideas and beliefs extended themselves into Buddhism. Had this mutual extension not taken place, Buddhism would have remained an outsider detained at the gates of Chinese intellectual and spiritual fortresses.<sup>198</sup>

A “mutual conversion” thus took place that ensured Buddhism became “enfleshed” in China.<sup>199</sup>

Song stated that Christian thought in the West went through a similar process as it encountered the Greco-Roman philosophical world. “But it is precisely this *köyi*,

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>197</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 175.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 169.

this method of extension,” he complained, “that has been denied to the Christian churches in Asia and Africa until recently.”<sup>200</sup> The Buddhist *kōyi* therefore presents Christianity with a missionary pattern to follow. It would enable Christian faith to be open to Asian religiosity, while at the same time offering a new way of salvation to Asians. Recently Song wrote:

Could what happened to Buddhism in China also happen to Christianity? Or is it too difficult, if not impossible, at this stage of Asian history for Christianity to become ‘acclimatized and firmly rooted’ in the soil of Asian communities in which it has come to stay? I would like to believe that the task is not impossible, although it will be difficult. The awareness of this difficulty should excite and challenge us.<sup>201</sup>

In the area of Christian mission, then, Song’s dialogue with Buddhism serves to highlight the ill-conceived and damaging militancy of Christian missionary attitudes in Asia and the Third World. This stands in contrast to the Buddhist expansion in China, which he holds up as a model for future Christian mission. The Buddhist emphasis on compassionate service prompts him also to reassess the meaning and task of mission. From stressing differences between Buddhist and Christian spirituality early on in his career, he has come to view the possibility of both religions developing a common mission to suffering humanity.

#### 4.2.4 Christianity and Asian Religions

##### *A Welcome to Religious Pluralism*

In the 1960s Song emphasised the ontological nature of Jesus Christ’s divinity and warned against losing sight of Christ’s uniqueness in an effort to accommodate other religions. “The difference between Christ and founders of religions,” he wrote, “is absolute and not relative.”<sup>202</sup> Despite the aesthetic qualities found in Asia’s religions, they remained “alienated from God, exhibiting human nature in its painful struggle for self-salvation.”<sup>203</sup> Early on, then, he espoused a theology of religions that appears somewhat Barthian in influence.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>201</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 23.

<sup>202</sup> Choan-Seng Song, “The Witness of Christ,” 24.

<sup>203</sup> Song, “The Role of Christology,” 80.

In the following decades Song's position changed. He began to recognise that religious truth could be found outside Christianity. Developments within Asia influenced his thought. He asserted:

Asian nationalism and revitalization of Asian religions after World War II thrust upon the church in Asia the urgent need for self-criticism of her theological assumptions and re-evaluation of the place and the meaning of Asian religions in God's creation and redemption.<sup>204</sup>

This theological re-evaluation led Song to criticise Christian exclusivism, claiming that it had "alienated many an honest seeker of truth" and turned the church into a ghetto community.<sup>205</sup> His move away from the conservative position of the 1960s appears linked to a shift in his focus of theological inquiry. The impression gained of his theology in the 1960s is of one concerned primarily with a correct understanding of the doctrine of God and biblical revelation. In the 1970s this changes, people rather than doctrine become the focus. This focus on people, he argued, does not reduce theology to humanism but takes the theological implications of creation and incarnation seriously.<sup>206</sup> People now become clues to who and where God is. "Human longings and struggles for grace, acceptance, communion, salvation, and life in Asian settings are the contexts of revelation for Christian theology in Asia," he wrote.<sup>207</sup> From the sages of ancient China to the religious and political struggles of Mahatma Gandhi and modern movements for democracy in Asia – all are seen by Song as witnesses to God's saving love.

Christians, claimed Song, may have adapted to "social, political, ideological, and cultural pluralism" but "they have not, on the whole, come to terms with the world of religious pluralism."<sup>208</sup> Since the 1980s he has repeatedly invited Christians to accept that religious plurality is here to stay. Further, he wrote:

We fail to realize that the pluralism of the world is, in fact, part of God's design of creation. God has created a world of pluralism filled with people's stories and their endless tales telling us theologians about God, humanity, and creation.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 175.

<sup>205</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "The Decisiveness of Christ," in *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1976), 244.

<sup>206</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "New Frontiers of Theology in Asia: Ten Theological Theses," *SEAJT* 20, no. 1 (1979): 16.

<sup>207</sup> Song, "Context and Revelation," 65.

<sup>208</sup> Song, "Christian Education," 165.

<sup>209</sup> Song, "Theology that Tells People's Passion Stories," 18.



In several places he quotes Romans 11: 33-36, which speaks of God's deep wisdom and inscrutable ways in dealing with humanity, to explain pluralism from a Christian perspective. Christian faith "should begin with such a doxology," he wrote, which would open and attune Christians to God's presence in Asian religions.<sup>210</sup>

As well as finding theological richness in pluralism, Song has challenged Christian attitudes to syncretism. In an early writing he spoke out against syncretism.<sup>211</sup> But in recent years he has adopted a more positive approach, built on an awareness of the complex nature of religious identity within a multireligious context. In his recent book he gave the example of a Palestinian Quaker woman's description of her mother's religious identity as being shaped by Jewish, Islamic and Christian influences. He commented further:

It is the nature of religion to be syncretistic, evident in view of the interrelatedness of religion and culture. Religion and culture give birth to, shape, and change each other; they rise and fall in each other's company.<sup>212</sup>

There is in his opinion no pure culture and no pure religion. "It is time," he argued, "for Christians, like that Palestinian Christian woman, to realize that we are syncretistic by nature and to learn to be creatively syncretistic in what we believe and practice."<sup>213</sup> Asia of course, as the birthplace of the world's major religious traditions, offers the clearest examples of religious syncretism at work.

### ***Jesus and the Theology of Religions***

To argue against exclusivism in the theology of religions and to develop his own position, Song called for a new biblical and theological understanding of Jesus. He took issue with the traditional interpretation of Acts 4:12 that stressed the need for an exclusive belief in Jesus in order to be saved. He argued that the passage must be understood within its context as a confession made within a wholly Jewish situation, where the real issue was a struggle of power between the poor (the Jewish Christians) and the privileged (the religious authorities).<sup>214</sup> An exclusivist theology is also, Song claimed, built upon a false image of Jesus as an all-powerful "Davidic

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<sup>210</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Wisdom and Knowledge of God," in *The Bible in Theology and Preaching*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 169. The perception of the mysterious wisdom of God makes Paul a "'great' theologian" in Song's opinion. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 10.

<sup>211</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 178-179.

<sup>212</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 208.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>214</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 241-251.

Messiah figure.”<sup>215</sup> This projection onto Jesus of regal power and rule by conquer was rejected by Jesus himself, who stressed humility and service, but it became a central image for the Christian church. Commenting on the image’s influence, he wrote:

In due time exclusivism has become deeply engraved on the Christian mind. . . . It has even become an organic part of the ways in which we view the world. The Christian church has thrived on it. It has been proud of it. It is the criterion of truth by which one’s orthodoxy is tested and judged. Many Christians have become incapable of appreciating people of other cultures and religions as “children of God.”<sup>216</sup>

Further arguments against exclusivism by Song include his taking issue with the Protestant emphasis on personal faith in Jesus, claiming that it elevates human faith at the expense of God’s grace given to all humanity.<sup>217</sup>

In the 1970s Song sought to distance himself from the theological language of ‘uniqueness’ to describe the significance of Jesus for humanity. He stated a preference for the term “decisiveness.”<sup>218</sup> He came close also to Karl Rahner’s theology in affirming the universal and hidden presence of Christ that he said constituted “the very basis of man’s spirituality.”<sup>219</sup> Later, though, he was critical of the theology associated with Rahner. He argued that people of other religions, especially those in suffering and struggling against injustice, reveal Jesus to the world. They can do this because all people are related to Christ through creation in God’s image. He wrote:

There is no “anonymous” Christ any more; there is only “nonymous” Christ. Jesus has disclosed his identity to the people as one standing with them through thick and thin. There are no “anonymous” Christians; there are only “nonymous” people - people who bear the ikon of God and whose flesh the Word has become.<sup>220</sup>

It appears that he wanted theology to recognise a clear rather than hidden presence of God in people, including people of other religions. This recognition is growing in Asia, he asserted, as theologians “shift from comparative study to exploration of theological insights” in Asian religions, cultures and histories.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 153.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>217</sup> Song, “The Power of Grace,” 54.

<sup>218</sup> Song, “The Decisiveness of Christ,” 247.

<sup>219</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 197. See also page 192.

<sup>220</sup> Choan-Seng, “Christ Behind the Mask Dance,” *CTC Bulletin* 3, no. 3 (1982): 39; see also, Song, *Third-Eye*, 8.

<sup>221</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 9.

Particularly in the 1990s, Song advocated a biblical re-examination of the person and message of Jesus in order to develop a theology of religions. Such a theology should not begin from a concept of Christ's uniqueness, which he said fosters Christian self-righteousness. Rather, he wrote:

As we Christians face other religions, we must begin where Jesus began - the message of God's reign; we must pursue the road Jesus pursued - the vision of God's reign that creates a community of men, women and children socially, economically, politically and even religiously marginalized.<sup>222</sup>

Salvation in Jesus is expressed in the message of God's reign, which is understood to be essentially ethical and social in character. This enabled Song to see God's saving activity in Asia's religious traditions clearly displayed in their moral and compassionate concern for humanity. He commented:

In other religions we can be dealing with the heart of the gospel - the gospel of God's reign. Living with people of other faiths, we are engaged with them in the central ministry of Jesus - the ministry of justice and love. And in our effort to fathom the meaning of other faiths, we may be led to a richer experience of God's reign and its deeper meaning as Jesus himself has shown with a marvellous constancy of words and deeds.<sup>223</sup>

He supported this view with reference to biblical passages. The story of the Good Samaritan is seen as a "monograph in Jesus' theology of religions"<sup>224</sup> because it shows a religious outsider embodying the love of God. In another example, he interpreted Jesus' open invitation to the kingdom of God in the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk. 14: 16-24) as one made regardless of religious or cultural identity.<sup>225</sup> These examples and others serve to portray Jesus as standing against a theology that separates people into saved or unsaved according to religious affiliation. Rather, the God of Jesus is a God of surprises whose grace is offered to all and whose loving presence is able to straddle religious traditions.

The main evidence of God's presence, for Song, is found in the socio-ethical witness of religions and cultures. "It is, in the final analysis," he wrote, "this love of God translated into love of neighbor that for Jesus would constitute the truth of religions, including Christianity."<sup>226</sup> It is not, then, necessary to have an explicit faith in Jesus as personal saviour. Faith itself is understood anew by Song. He wrote:

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<sup>222</sup> Song, "The Power of Grace," 51.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 152.

<sup>225</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 38.

<sup>226</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 257.

For Jesus faith is a matter of life rather than doctrine. For him it is not so much how you worship God in heaven as how you live with your neighbour in the world. Faith for Jesus is not a set of principles but the power of life. It is not even a creed to be recited but the moral power to do what is right and compassionate.<sup>227</sup>

With such an understanding of faith and the message of God's reign, Song is able to claim that God's saving activity in Christ is to be found in the Asian world.

It would be wrong to think that Song downplays the significance of Jesus in his theology of religions because he eschews a doctrinal approach to other religions based on Christ's uniqueness. True, the mystery of God's presence for Song is not doctrinally fixed but something to be discovered in the context of everyday life where people and their stories mediate this presence. But Jesus is considered as the one who encapsulates and defines God's truth for humanity most fully. Jesus is not simply a messenger of salvation, wrote Song, "He *is* salvation."<sup>228</sup> Speaking of Jesus' troubled prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, Song commented:

This ability of Jesus to discern God's will clearly and without fail must have come from his deep awareness of God's presence within him, an awareness that perhaps no other human being is able to have so deeply as Jesus, neither in the past, nor in the present or future.<sup>229</sup>

Jesus remains central to Song's theology of religions.

Gone, however, is Song's concern to state and defend the divine ontological status of Jesus. Such doctrines in his opinion tend to misrepresent Jesus, who was more concerned with the message of love in the reign of God than self-promotion. Traditional theology, complained Song, has made Jesus into a cult figure and at the same time devalued his message. What is required is a change in the way Christians understand the significance of Jesus' person as being inseparable from the message of love he preached and lived. Recently he wrote about the change required:

Change in the way we have treated Jesus as an object of worship, an article of faith, and a system of doctrine and not as the living presence of God, as one who brings hope to the hopeless, courage to those in distress, and love to the human community racked by hate, conflict, and division.<sup>230</sup>

Song does define Jesus in Trinitarian terms where he is related to God through the power of the Spirit, but the Spirit for Song is primarily ethical in nature. It is the

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<sup>227</sup> Song, "Doing Christian Theology with Jesus in Asia," 107.

<sup>228</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 209.

<sup>229</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 85.

<sup>230</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 4.

“Spirit of love” which empowers Jesus and other people to realise the reign of God.<sup>231</sup> Song emphasises the message of love to the point where Jesus and salvation are defined by it. Yet Jesus embodies this message and so remains the focus of Song’s theology, as evidenced by his many writings on Jesus. He wants Christians to move away from a dogmatic understanding of Jesus, which he sees as static and judgmental in character, to a more dynamic and open one that sees God’s truth revealed in Jesus through the love he lived and preached. This amounts to a swing away from a “Jesus-centered” towards a “Jesus-oriented” approach in Christian faith.<sup>232</sup> However, he stands opposed to a theocentric approach to other religions, writing: “I do not know God apart from Jesus and Jesus apart from God.”<sup>233</sup>

In recent reflections, Song further explained his understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God, differentiating it from the theocentric and the christocentric positions:

Over against these two opposing views, it has to be said that Christian faith is faith in “Jesus-God” and in “God-Jesus.” Note the hyphen in both expressions. The hyphen is not an equal sign. While the hyphen does not identify Jesus with God, it does not separate Jesus from God either. It neither equates God with Jesus nor alienates God from Jesus. It is in what Jesus said and did that a Christian comes to know God, leading to an important point: the God that comes to be known through Jesus is the God who is active not only inside the church but outside it, not only among Christians but among people not related to Christianity. If God cannot be confined to the Christian church and its members, how can Jesus, who shares an experience of this God, be restricted to the Christian community?<sup>234</sup>

Jesus remains central to Song’s belief. “Jesus,” he wrote, “was and is the living presence that embraces other presences.”<sup>235</sup> But it is the love Jesus lived through his proclamation of the reign of God, rather than any philosophical notion about his divine nature, that is decisive for Christian faith. This is extended to an interpretation of the resurrection. As with the cross, the resurrection of Jesus is explained in terms of a manifestation of God’s love. “Love,” Song declared, “is life-force, a force that gives birth to life, a force that sustains it, gives meaning to it, and re-creates it.”<sup>236</sup> Thus understood, the resurrection is a force of love that Song says was already made

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<sup>231</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 299.

<sup>232</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 64.

<sup>233</sup> Song, “Five Stages,” 120.

<sup>234</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 63.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.



present in the lives of people whom Jesus healed and to whom he ministered. Further he stated, “If this is what resurrection signifies, it did not take place only within the Christian community but also in other communities.”<sup>237</sup>

### ***The Necessity of Interreligious Dialogue***

With the above outlined understanding of pluralism and of Jesus, interreligious dialogue is presented as an ethical and theological necessity. Using images from a story in ‘Alice Through the Looking Glass,’ Song spoke of seven stages of dialogue. The stages begin with ignorance and rash judgement of the other’s religion based on limited knowledge and religious prejudices, but move on to an interest in and listening to the other’s religious beliefs and practices. The final stage is called “‘dialogical conversion’” which involves “turning away (*metanoia*) from using dialogue as a means to convert others and turning toward stepping into the life of one’s dialogue partners.”<sup>238</sup> Here the aim is to achieve an in-depth appreciation of the other’s religion, but it is also to join forces in building a more just and loving world. The ethical core to interreligious dialogue is crucially important to Song – it informs both the motivation for dialogue and its goal. Dialogue’s focus, he argued, should move away from doctrinal debate towards a common exploration of the ethical force for good to be found in religions. He wrote:

We are called to be in solidarity with men, women, and children who struggle for justice and peace. We will be together with them in search of God’s purpose for humanity. We will learn from one another to discover the richness of God’s creation. And we will assist one another in mobilizing the spiritual forces against the demonic powers of destruction.<sup>239</sup>

This vision for interreligious dialogue is in keeping with the overall socio-ethical emphasis in his theology. It is around human concerns – peace, justice, a common humanity – that he believes people from different religions can unite rather than around doctrinal discussion, which tends to lead to meaningless talk and division.<sup>240</sup>

### ***Similarities and Differences between Buddhism and Christianity***

Song’s writings explore various similarities between Buddhism and Christianity that suggest closeness in matters of religious belief and practice, but he

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>238</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 141.

<sup>239</sup> Song, “Christian Education,” 175.

<sup>240</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 6-7.

also points out differences that need to be respected. The similarities centre largely on the theme of love/compassion, which Song regards as standing at the heart of both traditions. From *Lotus Sutra* quotations to the writing of Akitagawa Lyunosuke, from stories of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara to those of the self-immolation of Vietnamese monks and nuns – all of these point to Buddhism as a religion of great compassion.

Given the way God’s love operates as the key theme in Song’s theology, it comes as no surprise that he sees closer theological convergence between Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity than with any other form of Buddhism. It is in Pure Land teachings that emphasis is placed on the saving power of Amitabha’s compassion. This in Song’s opinion “bears some *substantial* resemblance to the Christian experience of God’s love and grace.”<sup>241</sup> At the same time he explained it as “a complete deviation from the Buddhist orthodoxy”<sup>242</sup> that stresses the importance of relying only on one’s own effort for salvation. Recently, he has reflected further on the theological significance of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. In particular he has examined the life and writings of Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism.<sup>243</sup> He compared the faith of Shinran favourably with that of Paul and Luther,<sup>244</sup> and explained that the school of Buddhism he founded embraces the Christian ideas of grace, faith and love. Shin Buddhism is also praised by Song because it appealed to common folk and raised the status of lay people and women. Moreover, the similarities he found between Christian faith and Pure Land prompted him to argue that there exists a “basic, primal, and primordial sensibility that underlies human religious consciousness.”<sup>245</sup> He went on to say that this consists of “faith and a believing heart”<sup>246</sup> in a divine presence that lies beyond and yet is intimately related to humanity. With this understanding in mind, Song reinterpreted the Buddhist ‘Parable of the Raft.’<sup>247</sup> He stated that the raft, which is useful for crossing a river but must be given up when the river is crossed, alludes to all the religious teachings, doctrines and practices people believe in and hold dear in their various religious traditions. In his interpretation, the parable teaches that people

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<sup>241</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 90.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>243</sup> Honen (1133-1212) was first to found a major Pure Land school in Japan, where he emphasised recitation of the name of Amitabha. Shinran was a disciple of Honen who established his own school of Pure Land – *Jodoshinshu* or ‘True Teaching of the Pure Land’ - with an emphasis on faith in and gratitude towards the grace of Amitabha.

<sup>244</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 248-249.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>247</sup> See page 23 of this thesis for an explanation of the raft.

should not become attached to these elements of human religiosity but should rely on the primordial “divine grace that enables us to be what we are and to do what we do.”<sup>248</sup> The dialogue with Pure Land Buddhism, then, serves as a means to emphasise a primal divine presence of grace and love operating within all peoples.

Though Song’s dialogue is not primarily concerned with similarities and differences in doctrines, his utilisation of Buddhist terms, concepts and teachings suggest that Buddhism has a profound insight into human nature and a certain grasp of religious truth which encourages comparison with Christian beliefs. His use of Zen stories and Buddhist concepts like *garbhadhatu* show that Christians can profitably learn from Buddhist thought. He also recognises that some Asian Christians have already absorbed Buddhist teachings into their Christian faith and practice.<sup>249</sup> This and his own use of Buddhist teachings to rethink Christian doctrines and enrich theological expression lend weight to his argument that there can be creative forms of religious syncretism. He was even able to make the bold claim that “*satori* is akin to the revelation on which Christian faith depends.”<sup>250</sup> It would be wrong to say though that Song does not recognise essential differences between Buddhist and Christian conceptions of religious truth. *Satori*, for example, is only akin to Christian truth in so far as it represents an experience and new understanding of the world that brings a radical change to one’s life and is rooted in an awareness of life’s suffering. Christian *satori*, Song cautioned, comes from the Holy Spirit not the effort of the human person as understood in Buddhism.<sup>251</sup>

Further similarities and differences are recognised by Song in his comparisons of Jesus and the Buddha, most of which have been mentioned earlier. He noted that the primary concern of both Buddha and Jesus was to bring relief to suffering humanity. This common concern provides interreligious dialogue today with its proper focus, not discussions on doctrine but a commitment to the poor and oppressed in society. The Buddha, in his denunciation of the caste system, is also seen as similar to Jesus in his willingness to break with religious tradition in order to be more inclusive and caring. Song even saw a similarity in the way in which miraculous birth stories became attached to both Buddha and Christ in a theological process that emphasised their supernatural nature at the expense of their human concerns.<sup>252</sup> These similarities point to a profound likeness in religious understanding

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<sup>248</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 242.

<sup>249</sup> In this regard he mentions a Japanese painter, Yoko Makashi, who has absorbed elements of Buddhist spirituality into her life, giving her artistic works greater depth. Song, *Believing Heart*, 240.

<sup>250</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 63.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>252</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 89.

and practice between Jesus and the Buddha. But the Buddha and Jesus are not simply names for the same divine reality. Song explained:

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me stress that the Buddha, for example, is not Jesus Christ. For that matter neither is Jesus Christ a Bodhisattva. As historical personalities the Buddha and Christ have little to do with one another. The cultural and religious contexts in which each of them carried out their missions were vastly different. But the ultimate difference from the Christian point of view comes from our faith in Jesus Christ as the direct and complete embodiment of God's saving love.<sup>253</sup>

Significant differences were also found in their experience of religious truth. *Nirvana* may be related to the reign of God through its ethical dimension but he stated, "Nirvana taught by the Buddha is not God."<sup>254</sup> They point to two related but ultimately different realities. Song also stated that the redemptive significance of Jesus' death was of a different order to that found in the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhists. He wrote, "The redemptive nature of Christ's death cannot be reproduced by the death of another person."<sup>255</sup> These clarifications show that he does not operate with a pluralist theology where all religions are seen as equal. There appears to be a decisive quality about Jesus, in the way he embodies and reveals the love of God, that commands Song's faith and ultimate allegiance.

### **A Relationship of Love**

Despite the significant differences mentioned above, Buddhism and Christianity are considered to be deeply related in Song's work. The relationship between them is perhaps best described as a relationship of love. Compassion in Buddhism is seen as a reflection of God's love and evidence of divine presence. It leads Song to dismiss the charge that Buddhism is a mere religion of salvation by works and to state that "the Buddhist nirvana may not be so far from the kingdom of God."<sup>256</sup> Indeed, he goes further by suggesting that *nirvana* is a way to salvation. He wrote:

But the restoration of health, harmony, and peace *here and now* for life afflicted with pain and suffering – this is essentially what nirvana is all about. May this not be the way that God has chosen to bring salvation to the masses in Asia for whom to live is to suffer? Is it so inconceivable that God is nirvana to them – peace, harmony,

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<sup>253</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 133.

<sup>254</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 168.

<sup>255</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 139.

<sup>256</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 139.

and health? Can we, in our faith and theology, dispense with the Buddhist world in which the masses of humanity gain some taste of salvation through the Buddhist way to nirvana?<sup>257</sup>

Of course the source of this salvation is for Song the God of Jesus Christ and, as already mentioned, *nirvana* and God are not seen as equivalents. The Buddhist, however, does not need to become Christian in order to have a 'taste of salvation.' In the end, Song said, Christians do not know if they will meet with Buddhists "before the throne of God's salvation and glory."<sup>258</sup> That depends on God's love and grace not human decision. The task for Christians in the meantime is to seek a deeper awareness of Christ's presence in the lives and spirituality of Buddhists, to learn from them, and to share Christian faith in God's love with them in a common commitment to justice and peace in the world.

In the development of Song's theology of religions, then, Buddhism has been an important dialogue partner, representing one of the 'revitalised' Asian traditions that has caused him to rethink his theological views. He points to various similarities between Buddhism and Christianity in teachings, practices and in the concerns of both religions' founders. He finds particular similarities between Pure Land Buddhism and Christian faith. Yet he points to fundamental differences too. Jesus, who embodies God's love, appears to be qualitatively different from the Buddha, who seems only to reflect the love of God. Jesus, though, is to be understood in terms of the message of love he preached and lived rather than on any prior philosophical notion of divinity. It also appears that Jesus does not exhaust the possibilities of God's communication with humanity, and so Song is willing to posit that the Buddhist way to salvation, especially in its ethical orientation, is God-given and a sufficient means for Asian peoples.

### 4.3 Summary of the Dialogue with Buddhism

From the above study it has been shown that Song has grown to appreciate the religious worth of Buddhism. From the 1980s on his theological discourse makes use of a great variety of Buddhist resources. These give support to his belief that God has been actively present in the Asian context throughout history. Buddhist stories, images, and teachings are employed to criticise traditional theology, particularly its

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<sup>257</sup> Song, *Compassionate God*, 168.

<sup>258</sup> Song, *Third-Eye*, 141.



attachment to dogma and liking for abstract thinking. They provide Asian theology with new purpose to develop an intuitive awareness of God within the Asian context, and a new methodology to begin from the reality of suffering and spiritual longing in people's lives. Buddhism is shown also to equip theological reflection with new terms, concepts and historical materials that enrich and challenge Christian faith.

The most significant trait of Buddhism for Song is compassion. In various ways he relates this compassion to the suffering love of God central to Christian faith. This again enables him to argue that the Asian context, including its religions, is full of theological meaning. It may be unclear at times how he understands the role of suffering in Buddhism and the Buddhist social concern, but on the whole he draws inspiration from the Buddhist practice of compassion.

In his reflections on Christian mission, Song's dialogue with Buddhism serves his critique of the Western missionary enterprise in Asia. In contrast to Christian missions to Asia, the early Buddhist mission to China is upheld as an exemplary model. Buddhist compassion, as seen in the *bodhisattva* ideal, also challenges Christian mission to rethink its methods and aim, away from a militant desire to convert others to a concern to make the love of God manifest in the world. With such a missiology, Christians find that they are drawn into a common mission with Buddhists, where they can join together in seeking social justice and, in so doing, each learn from the other's religiosity. This common mission should, he holds, be the main aim of interreligious dialogue.

Finally, dialogue with Buddhism has been an important factor in Song's reflections in the theology of religions. He seeks to be open to religious insights in Buddhism while remaining theologically focussed on the person and life of Jesus. This enables him to appear appreciative of many aspects of Buddhist belief and practice. His use of Buddhist resources to criticise, challenge, and develop theology also point to a close relationship between the two religions, even if this relationship is not described comprehensively in theological terms. Furthermore, his appreciation of religious plurality as being part of God's design, and the positive impression that Buddhism has made upon his theology, means he is prepared to suggest that Buddhist enlightenment may be God's way of communicating salvation to the people of Asia. And yet, in his work, Buddhist resources, including the notion of *nirvana*, are understood and incorporated in terms of his Christian faith and worldview.

## Chapter 5

### Aloysius Pieris

#### 5.1 Introduction

##### 5.1.1 The Work of Aloysius Pieris

Fr. Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan theologian and Jesuit priest, was born in 1934. After studies and some teaching in the West he returned in 1974 to settle in Sri Lanka, where he has engaged theologically with the social and religious realities of his homeland and the wider Asian world. He is, according to a recent statement by an Indian theologian, R. Isvaradevan, “Widely regarded as perhaps the most stimulating, original and creative thinker in Asia today.”<sup>1</sup>

Pieris has several academic qualifications from institutions in Europe and Asia that cover degrees in Pali and Sanskrit, Philosophy, Theology, and Prepolyphonic Music. He was the first Christian to receive a doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy from the University of Sri Lanka (Colombo) in 1972. He has lectured in theology and on Asian religions at several universities across the world, including the Gregorian University in Rome and the Ecumenical Institute of the University of Münster, and has given papers at numerous theological conferences. For more than twenty years he has taught yearly courses as ‘Professor of Asian Philosophies and Religions’ at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila.<sup>2</sup> He is also an influential member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). He has had wide exposure to Asian cultures and societies, including a spell of several years in India during his Jesuit noviciate, though for the past twenty-five years he has based himself in a community near Colombo.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Isvaradevan, “Some Major Aspects of Aloysius Pieris’ Liberation Theology: Critical Reflections,” *AJT* 11, no. 2 (1997): 204.

<sup>2</sup> Details of Pieris’ qualifications and also of his teaching posts can be found in Philip Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World: Divine Revelation in the Theology of Jean-Marc Éla, Aloysius Pieris and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1996), footnotes 3 and 4, 160. The title of his PhD thesis in Buddhism was “Some Salient Aspects of Consciousness and Reality in Pāli Scholasticism as Reflected in the Commentaries of Ācariya Dhammapāla.”

Orbis Books have published three books by Pieris. For the most part, each book consists of a compilation of articles drawn from his long and prolific writing career that stretches back to the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Other articles by him are to be found in a number of well-known Asian and Western publications, including *Vidyajyoti* and *The Way*. Since 1974 he has edited *Dialogue*, a journal published in Colombo with an international readership, which seeks to encourage debate and co-operation between Buddhists and Christians. The breadth of issues and depth of scholarship that characterises his work are impressive. He writes with ease on topics such as interreligious marriage, Marxism, feminism, liberation theology, Ignatian spirituality, Roman Catholic ecclesiology, and missiology. In most of his writings he enters into dialogue with or makes some reference to Buddhist thought and practice. His writing has been described as “heavy reading”<sup>4</sup> due to its scholarly nature and condensed style. This, and the fact that his work consists of short articles, can make it difficult to draw conclusions about his theological position. Nevertheless, a theological theme that dominates his thought is clearly evident: he is recognised for his efforts to explicate an Asian theology of liberation that arises out of engagement with the social and religious realities of the Asian context.

“A scholar of Asian religions”<sup>5</sup> is how Pieris described himself, but it would be wrong to see him only in this light. In 1974, upon returning to settle in Sri Lanka after a brief spell of teaching in Rome, he founded the Tulana Research Centre. The Centre is home to a small resident community of a few lay and religious members. Many people pass through and stay for short periods. Tulana is where he continues with his theological writing and exegesis of Buddhist texts. However, it is also a meeting place for interreligious dialogue, for workers’ groups, and for youth, where there is a focus on the concerns of the poor and marginalised in society. As a priest and Catholic religious he is also involved in pastoral care, in the formation of priests, in Christian ecumenical groups, and as a theological resource person for church groups and Catholic religious orders. His work, then, is not restricted to theological

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<sup>3</sup> I have, wherever possible, consulted and referred to articles reproduced in these three books according to their original publication details. Where this has not been possible, I have listed the original publication details given by Pieris in brackets after the article title and then stated which book they are found in. Page numbers, in these cases only, refer to the article as reproduced in the book. His three books are: *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); and *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> William G. Young, review of *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, by Aloysius Pieris, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 9, no. 1 (1991): 72.

<sup>5</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Two Encounters in My Theological Journey,” in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 146.

reflection but he interacts with the practical concerns of many other people.<sup>6</sup> It is out of such encounters that much of his theological discourse develops.

### 5.1.2 The Dialogue with Buddhism: Scope and Motivating Factors

#### *An In-depth and Wide-ranging Dialogue*

Over the last thirty or so years, Pieris' dialogue with Buddhism has developed into one that is remarkable both in its depth and breadth. His dialogue is mostly with the Theravada tradition, the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He has, though, travelled in countries influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, and at times he comments on aspects of Mahayana philosophy and practice. As a scholar of Buddhism he wrote, "The academic quest for the original message of the Buddha is alive in me."<sup>7</sup> This is reflected in many of his writings, which explore and explain specific Buddhist themes. But he has gone beyond the academic study of Buddhism and sought to enter deeply into its own self-understanding and spirituality. When studying for his doctorate in Buddhism he requested guidance by a Buddhist monk in meditation and introspection. He entered into what he later called a "*communicatio in sacris*,"<sup>8</sup> where use is made of tools which the Buddhist religion provides (scripture, meditation, worship, and so on) in an attempt to access and appreciate the core experience of inner liberation that lies at its heart. This "participatory approach"<sup>9</sup> developed by Pieris moved the scope of dialogue beyond the mere study of another religion towards an inner appreciation and assimilation of its liberative message. The experience *in* Buddhism led him to a deeper theological reflection on the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity and their understanding of liberation.<sup>10</sup>

An example of how this in-depth encounter with Buddhism has borne fruit can be found in the way Pieris has managed to assimilate Buddhist elements into his

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<sup>6</sup> For a snapshot of Pieris' varied ministry at Tulana see the foreword by Paul F. Knitter in Pieris, *Fire and Water*, xv-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism" [First published in *Cross Currents* 37 (1987)], in *Love Meets Wisdom*, 120. Pieris does not explain the Latin term; it would translate as 'a communion/sharing in sacred things.'

<sup>9</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism: A Theological Reading of Historical Encounters" [First published in *Cistercian Studies* 15, (1980)], in *Love Meets Wisdom*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Pieris uses the term 'liberation' to describe the experience of *nirvana* and the effect of the Buddha's teachings on the life of the Buddhist, which is in line with the Buddhist tradition's use of *vimokkha*. His use of the term also agrees with a definition used in the Roman Catholic Church. At the Second Vatican Council, at the request of Japanese bishops, the word *nirvana* was translated as 'liberation.' Dumoulin, "Buddhism – A Religion of Liberation," 29.

liturgical celebrations of the Mass. Early on, these were experimental liturgies incorporating readings from Buddhist scriptures. The aim was to translate the Christian message using a Buddhist conceptual framework and to celebrate common religious values. In his more recent writings about the Mass he celebrates at seminars in Manila, a greater development in his relationship to Buddhism is evident. Here the atmosphere of Buddhist mindfulness and silence runs throughout the whole liturgy, providing evidence of a deeper assimilation of central aspects of Buddhist spirituality into Christian practice.<sup>11</sup>

The comprehensive nature of Pieris' dialogue with Buddhism is displayed in the various ways that social, political and pastoral issues feature prominently in it. Many of his writings, for example, are concerned with the development of a liberation theology in Asia and how Buddhist spirituality can contribute to this. When this is translated into practical concerns at the grassroots level, dialogue can appear to be a costly option. This can be seen in his comments on the ethnic war that has engulfed Sri Lanka and divided religious communities.<sup>12</sup> He is not afraid to be critical of Buddhists who support the war and Christians who do little to protest against it. He pointed out that those who are involved in both Buddhist-Christian dialogue and a concern for the victims of injustice are liable to be mistrusted and targeted for criticism by both the leadership of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, who have shied away from interreligious dialogue, and government authorities, who are suspicious of the political motivations of people like himself. He has experienced this personally. In the 1980s there was a move by right-wing politicians to close Tulana. He was considered to be a subversive because of his involvement with worker's groups. Only the intervention of a nationally respected Buddhist monk, Walpola Rāhula, a friend of Pieris, saved the Centre.<sup>13</sup> Dialogue as Pieris has experienced it, then, is a dangerous commitment that upsets various religious and political interests. In terms of a pastoral concern he is involved in care for the poor and marginalised, and those in need of counsel both Christian and Buddhist. He was, for example, instrumental in setting up the 'Interreligious Association for Hearing

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<sup>11</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "A Liturgical Anticipation of a Domination-Free Church: The Liberating Story of An Asian Eucharist," in *Vision for the Future: Essays in Honour of Tissa Balasuriya, O.M.I.*, ed. B. Silva, A. Samarajiva and R. A. Dias (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1997), 69-82.

<sup>12</sup> An overview of the political situation and the role of the churches in Sri Lanka can be found in: Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Commission for Justice & Peace of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCC), *Hopelessness and Challenge* (Colombo: NCC, 1992); and Théo Tschuy, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion: Challenge to the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), 87-99.

<sup>13</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Ven. Dr. Aggamahāpandita Walpola Rāhula Mahā Thera, 1907-1997: A Tribute to a Great Teacher," *Dialogue* n.s. 24 (1997): 158-159.



Impaired Children.’<sup>14</sup> He also refers to his counselling of married couples of mixed religion, as they seek to deal with the stress and strain of having to bring up children and work out family relationships in a society that often looks unfavourably upon Buddhist-Christian marriages.<sup>15</sup> These various examples are evidence of the great breadth of issues and human concerns covered in Pieris’ dialogue with Buddhism.

### ***Understanding Buddhism from Within***

Pieris does not refer in any detail to an initial personal motivation for dialogue with Buddhism. Several factors seem to have been important and have influenced the manner of his dialogue. The Second Vatican Council, which was meeting at the time of his theological studies in Naples, inspired him to engage in dialogue by inaugurating a new sense of openness to the world and other religions in the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> Also, as a Sri Lankan he was aware of the need for Christians to take the reality of Buddhism seriously, describing it as “the air which the Church here continually breathes.”<sup>17</sup> At first for his doctoral research he thought of making a comparative study of Christianity and Buddhism. However, the eminent Buddhologist and Christian priest, Etienne Lamotte, advised him to “first plunge into the Buddhist lore, unprejudiced; master its own idiom and taste its flavour and make your scholarly assessment from within its own traditions.”<sup>18</sup> Pieris was supported and encouraged in these studies by the Society of Jesus. He recalled:

Fr. Emmanuel Crowther was the Provincial who sent me for Buddhist studies almost thirty years ago. The memorable words with which he sent me on his mission were the following: “Son, we are sending you on uncharted ground. We are not in a position to guide you. You will have to guide us later. So do not be afraid to make mistakes, even serious ones . . . but keep us informed.”<sup>19</sup>

Pieris was thus encouraged to understand Buddhism in its own terms and through its own practices.

The Buddhist establishment did not initially welcome Pieris’ desire to study their religion. Buddhist monks were suspicious of his motivations and sought to

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<sup>14</sup> Pieris, *Fire and Water*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Doctrinal, Legal and Cultural Factors in Buddhist-Christian Mixed Marriages,” *Dialogue* n.s. 5, no. 2 & 3 (1978): 91-107.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, footnote 2, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Liturgy and Dialogue with Buddhism: An Experiment,” *Dialogue* o.s. 15 (1968): 4. Buddhists account for some 70% of the Sri Lankan population, Christians are 7.5%.

<sup>18</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Buddhist Honours for Christian Priests,” *Dialogue* n.s. 10, no. 1 (1983): 3.

<sup>19</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Responsibilities of the CMRS in Sri Lanka Today,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection (VJTR)* 61, no. 9 (1997): 584.

delay and frustrate his application. Seen in light of the history of Christian-Buddhist relations in Sri Lanka it is not surprising that Pieris was tested in this way. In the past Christian missionaries were hostile towards Buddhism and misinterpreted its teachings. This sparked a similar Buddhist reaction, and the mutual distrust and dislike that resulted are still evident today.<sup>20</sup> A turning point came, Pieris recalled, when he asked to undergo training in introspection under a Buddhist monk. This was not simply a request by an eager student for more knowledge of Buddhism but involved a religious act where Pieris, in priest's cassock, prostrated himself before a senior monk with an offering of fruit and flowers. He asked the monk to be his spiritual guide, and from then on he was accepted within the Buddhist community. To further deepen his experience of Buddhism, in 1971 he grew his hair and beard long, went to India, and for a time took on the life of a mendicant monk following in the footsteps of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup> The perseverance and commitment that he displayed in those early years are evidence of a sincere desire to understand Buddhism as perceived and practised by Buddhists themselves, and of a profound appreciation for the spiritual truth to be found therein. Down the years he has come to share close friendships with Buddhists and count Buddhist monks among his spiritual guides.<sup>22</sup>

Pieris has gone on to fulfil the request of his former Jesuit Provincial by explaining the Buddhist religion to Christians in his writings and through his teaching. In these he has consistently argued for the necessity of dialogue for mutual enrichment. Throughout his written work there is a theological concern and struggle to relate what he has discovered within Buddhism to his Christian faith. He does not, however, seek to present a systematic theological interpretation of Buddhism. His concern is rather to reinterpret the meaning of salvation in a dialogue that involves the concerns of the poor as well as Buddhism. In doing so, he has moved the focus in dialogue away from doctrinal issues and comparative studies to the cause of liberation in its personal and social dimensions.

Over many years, then, Pieris has engaged in an ever deepening and widening dialogue with Buddhism. It is motivated by a sincere desire to understand the Buddhist tradition from within and to bring this into dialogue with Christian faith.

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<sup>20</sup> A historical study of Christian missionaries' attitudes to Buddhism is given in Elizabeth J. Harris, "A Case of Distortion: The Evangelical Missionary Interpretation of Buddhism in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sri Lanka," *Dialogue* n.s. 21 (1994): 19-42.

<sup>21</sup> Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, 174-175.

<sup>22</sup> Pieris' appreciation of Buddhist teachers can be seen in obituaries he has written. For example, "Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera (1901-1994): A Tribute from a Catholic Friend," *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995): 101-103. Pieris also dedicated his book, *Love Meets Wisdom*, to two Buddhist monks and two Christian priests, calling them his spiritual guides.

Yet, this dialogue is conceived and pursued in order to better understand and bring about liberation, especially for the poor and marginalised in society.

## 5.2 Theology and the Dialogue with Buddhism

### 5.2.1 An Asian Theology of Liberation

#### *Liberation Theology and Immersion in the Asian Context*

The theological openness, liturgical changes and engagement with world issues that Vatican II initiated in the Roman Catholic Church inspired Pieris and other Asians to develop in new theological directions. He wrote:

The Second Vatican Council was for me a point of departure rather than a point of arrival, as I joined my Asian colleagues over twenty years ago in the challenging task of applying the conciliar teachings to our Asian context and of trying to give concrete Asian form to the Spirit of the Council.<sup>23</sup>

This task has led him to explicate a theology of liberation that goes beyond the theological vision sponsored by Vatican II. The Council, in his opinion, resulted in a “liberal theology” that spoke mainly to the challenges of faith encountered by Western culture.<sup>24</sup> He contended that the Asian context required a more radical liberation theology that arises out of Christian immersion in the lives of the poor and the religious traditions to which they belong.<sup>25</sup> His arguments for such a theology came to prominence through an address he gave to an EATWOT conference in 1979.<sup>26</sup> His thesis was controversial, provoked great debate, and in many ways shaped the agenda of Asian theology for years to come. Sergio Torres, a Latin American theologian present at the conference, recognised that Pieris’ thought, which focused on both the social *and* multireligious dimensions of the Asian context,

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<sup>23</sup> Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, xv.

<sup>24</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Spirituality and Liberation,” *The Month* 16, no. 4 (1983): 119.

<sup>25</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines,” *Dialogue* n.s. 6, no. 1 & 2 (1979): 29.

<sup>26</sup> The Third Conference of EATWOT, held in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka. The conference papers and responses are given in Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980). Reference to Pieris’ conference paper in this thesis is as it appears in *Dialogue*: Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 29-52.

added a new dimension to the struggle for human liberation and to Third World theology.<sup>27</sup>

The Asian context, stated Pieris, is “a blend of a profound *religiousness* (which could be Asia’s greatest wealth) and an overwhelming *poverty* (which makes Asia a Third World continent).”<sup>28</sup> An authentic Asian theology must be built around a response to these two realities. In a sense he was saying nothing new, as Asian Christians before him had called for interreligious cooperation to promote social justice.<sup>29</sup> Yet he went beyond earlier calls, by viewing liberation as the *raison d’être* of both Christian theology and interreligious dialogue. Liberation is, for him, synonymous with salvation, though he prefers to use the word liberation and avoids the use of traditional theological language to describe the experience of salvation. Rather than speak of salvation in terms of a relationship with God, liberation is described and defined by him with language that stresses the inner conversion of the individual to become a selfless and greedless person, and the transformation of the social order from injustice to one of love and justice. Integral to this quest for liberation is a political commitment that seeks justice for the poor and marginalised, where Christians learn to understand the structural nature of sin found in unjust social relationships, as well as a commitment to overcome the sin resulting from interior selfishness. He also argued that this commitment needs to be complemented and strengthened by an in-depth appreciation of the liberative ethos that lies within the teachings and practices of other religious traditions. Christian theology in Asia, then, will need to combine a concern for social analysis of the causes and remedies of poverty *with* an understanding of how different religious traditions can contribute to the personal and social liberation of Asia’s masses. Only when this happens will it be able to respond to the two-fold character of the poor in Asia - their poverty and their plural religiosity - and develop a prophetic and healing ministry.

The method of immersion in the Asian context that Pieris advocates was further explained, as well as given biblical support and dramatic symbolism, when he spoke of the need for Christians to receive a double baptism. Mirrored on Jesus’ baptisms in the Jordan and on the cross, he called on Christians to undergo a “double

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<sup>27</sup> Sergio Torres, “A Latin American View of the Asian Theological Conference,” in *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, ed. Fabella, 193-196.

<sup>28</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 35.

<sup>29</sup> For example, the pioneering work of the Young Women’s and Young Men’s Christian Associations reported in Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Asia and the Ecumenical Movement 1895-1961* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 98-100, 106-107.

baptism in Asian religiosity and Asian poverty.”<sup>30</sup> The baptisms of Jesus are seen as expressions of great humility. The meaning of the baptism in the Jordan is interpreted as Jesus accepting the spirituality of John. This is a spirituality of asceticism and empathy with the sufferings of the rural religious poor that is directed against the forces of mammon.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Christians in Asia, Pieris counselled, should be willing to humbly submit themselves in learning before the masters of Asia’s religions, in order to understand the struggle against mammon that lies at the core of their traditions and the ways they have identified with the poor. The second baptism of Jesus, on the cross, completes the struggle against mammon. The cross stands for Jesus’ identification with all those who suffer injustice and oppression. It is the outcome of his humble option to side with the poor in their need for healing and social justice.<sup>32</sup> This second baptism calls Asian Christians today, Pieris claimed, to identify with the plight of the poor through entering into their lives and working for justice. Immersion in this double baptism, he believed, will result in the development of a theology with both an Asian ethos and a liberative message for all.

### ***Biblical Criteria***

In addition to the imagery of baptism, certain biblical criteria are referred to time and again by Pieris as central to an Asian theology of liberation. He discerned “two biblical axioms”<sup>33</sup> that define liberation, and which provide the focus for Christian faith and discipleship. These two are “the irreconcilable antagonism between God and wealth, and the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor, Jesus himself being this covenant.”<sup>34</sup> The first axiom constitutes the spirituality of the Beatitudes and calls upon Christians to become poor as Jesus was. Wealth, or the word mammon that Pieris prefers to use, not only refers to the accumulation of riches but, he added, also to the inner desires for “security and success, power, and prestige which are all spiritual acquisitions that make me appear privileged before God and people.”<sup>35</sup> It is in this first axiom that Christians find common cause with the religious traditions of Asia that have stressed the need to overcome inordinate desires through detachment, simplicity of life and ethical integrity. The second axiom is,

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<sup>30</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions and the Mission of the Local Churches,” *The Month* 15, no. 3 (1982): 87. The ‘double baptism’ symbol has been used regularly by Pieris over the past twenty years.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-89.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>33</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “To be Poor as Jesus was Poor?” *The Way* 24, no. 3 (1984): 186.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.



according to Pieris, unique to Christianity. God, through Jesus, opts to identify with the plight of the poor in a covenant relationship. The poor become God's representatives and the judges of the nations in Pieris' interpretation of Matthew 25.31-46. God chooses them not because they are poor but because God identifies both with their suffering, which exposes the sinful nature of society, and with their longings for justice, which reveals the ethical nature of liberation.

There are, according to Pieris, two basic kinds of poverty: "*Voluntary poverty*," and "*forced poverty*."<sup>36</sup> Voluntary poverty is a term that represents the human struggle to overcome inner selfish desires and the embracing of a simple lifestyle in solidarity with the poor. Forced poverty describes the lot of the materially poor and marginalised people of Asia and the injustices they suffer. He commented:

The first is the seed of liberation and the second is the fruit of sin. The Kingdom of God can be viewed in terms of a universal practice of the one and *consequent* elimination of the other.<sup>37</sup>

In several writings he further explored the christology that lies behind the two biblical axioms and its relation to the two kinds of poverty. He stated, for example:

For, God *opted* to be *born* poor in Jesus his Son (2 Cor 8,9; Phil 2,6-8), has gathered as his Body a new people comprising these two categories of poor: The poor by 'option' who are the *followers of Jesus* (Mt 19,21) and the poor by 'birth' who are the *proxy of Jesus* (Mt 25,31-46).<sup>38</sup>

The Christian tradition down the centuries has, he noted, recognised that Jesus is to be found in the poor and served through a ministry of healing. But the two biblical axioms call for the church to take a step beyond this, to see that God has chosen the poor to shape and direct salvation history.<sup>39</sup> In the Bible this is seen, for example, in the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and in the last judgement scene in Matthew 25.31-46.<sup>40</sup> The poor become a new source of revelation when conscious of their God-given role. They are indispensable for revealing the liberational thrust of the Bible and the need for a prophetic ministry aimed at social justice, as well as a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 192. Pieris uses the term 'the poor' in a generic sense. The poor refers to people living in destitution or oppressed because of cultural, social or religious factors; such as the rural population caught up in the Sri Lankan ethnic war, women in Asian societies, the mentally handicapped, and many others. Who constitute 'the poor' differs from context to context.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>39</sup> Pieris, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?" [First published in *Japan Missionary Bulletin* 40 (1986)], in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> For Mary see Aloysius Pieris, "Prajñā Piṭha: 'Seat of Wisdom,'" *VJTR* 63, no. 2 (1999): 109. Matthew 25.31-46 is referred to in several articles. See for example, Aloysius Pieris, "Whither the New Evangelism?" [First published in *Pacifica* 6 (1993)], in *Fire and Water*, 152.

healing ministry directed at alleviating immediate suffering.<sup>41</sup> Liberation in the Bible, Pieris recognised, has elements of a class struggle but, more fundamental than this, it is “the God-encounter of the poor, the poor by choice (the renouncers) and the poor by circumstances (the *anawin* of Yahweh).”<sup>42</sup>

### ***Interreligious Dialogue Focussed on Liberation***

Allied to the above biblical foundation, Pieris holds that Christianity and Asian religions meet in their common concern for liberation: a liberation of the inner person from selfishness and a desire to build a just community.<sup>43</sup> This common concern should, he argued, form the basis of interreligious dialogue in Asia. Dialogue should not be focussed on philosophical discussion but on establishing a programme for personal and social liberation, which meets the pressing needs of the poor and acts as a defence against the capitalist values sweeping across Asia. Cooperation between Christians and others on this agenda of liberation, he believes, will both benefit the lives of the poor and also lead to a deeper dialogue of religious beliefs and practices. It is important to note, however, that he is not only advocating a dialogue with Asia’s major religious traditions, but calls for more recognition of the liberative elements within primal religions. He makes a distinction between the “cosmic” and “metacosmic” levels of religion.<sup>44</sup> The former defines the basic primal religiosity of all peoples, mistakenly called animism, which includes belief in spirits and various powers. The metacosmic are religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, which to varying degrees have “domesticated and integrated” cosmic religiosity into their own religious traditions.<sup>45</sup> Unlike in Africa, Pieris explained, Asian cosmic religions do not see themselves as comprehensively salvific but rely on the metacosmic religions to supply them with a transcendent focus. The enduring value of cosmic religiosity, according to him, lies in its concern to meet the practical needs

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<sup>41</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, “Christ and Our Mission: In the Light of the Value-System Revealed to Israel and to the Church as Against Today’s Dominant System,” *Ignis* (South Asian Journal of Ignatian Spirituality: Anand, India) 27, no. 1 (1998): 30-32. He reflects in this article on a prophetic reinterpretation of the Parable of the Talents by a poor community.

For his argument that God’s covenant with the poor implies both a ministry of healing and prophecy see Aloysius Pieris, “Does Christ Have a Place in Asia? A Panoramic View,” in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?* Concilium 1993/2, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (London: SCM Press, 1993), 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?” 123. *Anawin* is a biblical Hebrew word that refers to the poor and oppressed.

<sup>43</sup> This has been a theme since early on in Pieris’ writings. For example, see Pieris, “Liturgy and Dialogue with Buddhism,” 13; Aloysius Pieris, “The Church, the Kingdom, and Other Religions,” *Dialogue* o.s. 22 (1970): 3.

<sup>44</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 33.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

of people and their communities, and also in the sensitive and holistic way it relates to the environment. This orientation prevents the liberational aim of metacosmic religions from becoming too abstract and detached from social and worldly concerns.

Dialogue with the religious traditions of Asia around the theme of liberation is seen by Pieris to introduce a new aspect to the theology of liberation that had already developed in the Christian church. He often mentions a debt to Latin American liberation theology in his work. He is grateful for the way in which it has moved the focus of theological debate away from one dominated by a Western concern to harmonise faith and reason towards one where faith is oriented towards liberation from oppression. He also applauded its emphasis on praxis and on a theology of the cross.<sup>46</sup> Yet, he sees a need “to complement the Latin American method with an Asian Critique of Classical Theology.”<sup>47</sup> This involves criticism of an exclusivist theology of religions that the West has imposed upon Asia, which has prevented Asian Christians from discovering the liberative potential present in Asia’s religious traditions.

Pieris further claimed that an appreciation of Asian culture and religions would lead to a new methodology in theology. This would be based on the “mutuality of praxis and theory,” which informs the religious approach to truth in Asian religions.<sup>48</sup> Religion is conceived here in more holistic terms: as a living and changing tradition, and as a way of life not simply a set of scriptures and doctrines. Christian theology is challenged to conceive religious truth not solely in terms of doctrine but as something that becomes progressively known through practical commitment to that truth in life and worship. He explained this process in relation to a theology of liberation:

A valid theology of liberation in Asia is born first as a *formula of life*, reflecting an ecclesial praxis of liberation continually internalized by being symbolically reenacted in the liturgy, before it is shaped gradually into a *confessional formula*.<sup>49</sup>

He has anticipated such a theology through his own committed work with the poor and in his experiments with liturgy.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 44-46.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>49</sup> Pieris, “A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?” 111-112.

<sup>50</sup> Ways in which Pieris has incorporated these liberative concerns in liturgical celebration can be found in Pieris, “Liturgy and Dialogue with Buddhism,” 1-16; Aloysius Pieris, “A Mass for Republic Day,” *Outlook* (Colombo) 5 (1972): 5-12.

## ***The Role of Basic Human Communities***

An Asian liberation theology, according to Pieris, has yet to fully emerge or be accepted in Asia. Asian Christian thinking and church life, he complained, are still dominated by Western theological agendas. He is also critical of two kinds of progressive theology that he believes to have erred in seeking to develop an authentic Asian theology. The theology of inculturation is one of these. Though it promotes interreligious dialogue and attempts to accommodate Asian religious thought and practices, it has nonetheless tended to neglect an explicit social and political concern for the poor. Liberation theology on the other hand, the second theology criticised by him, though concerned with social justice and identification with the poor has tended to neglect the Asian religiosity of the poor as a possible source of liberation.<sup>51</sup>

A more holistic theology, he believes, is taking shape on the fringes of the church among Christians who are willing to live with the poor and tap into the liberative streams of their religious traditions. This is happening in what he calls “basic human communities.”<sup>52</sup> These communities of different sizes and form have two common characteristics: they are focussed on identifying with the lives and concerns of the poor and they do so through interreligious collaboration. If given freedom by churches to develop, he foresees that new and radical theological expressions will emerge from these communities. A theology of liberation in Asia will, then, depend on three crucial factors: a concern for the poor and recognition of their role in bringing liberation; an empathetic understanding of the liberational thrust of Asian religions; and the development of theological expression through the praxis orientation of ‘basic human communities.’<sup>53</sup>

## ***A Double Baptism in the Buddhist Context***

The methodology of double baptism in the Asian realities of poverty and religiosity, which Pieris advocates in his theology of liberation, draws upon his personal experience in Sri Lanka. It was here in the Buddhist context that he went through his own double baptism.<sup>54</sup> As Jesus accepted John the Baptist as his

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<sup>51</sup> This critique of inculturationists and liberationists is made in several articles. For example, see Aloysius Pieris, “The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology” [First published in *CTC Bulletin* 3 (1982): 43-61], in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 87-110.

<sup>52</sup> Pieris, “A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?” 112

<sup>53</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions: An Asian Paradigm” [First published in *Horizons* 20, no. 1 (1993)], in *Fire and Water*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> He recounts his experiences in Pieris, “Two Encounters,” 141-146.

“guru,”<sup>55</sup> showing a readiness to affirm what was good in the spirituality of John, so Pieris bowed down before a Buddhist monk asking the monk to be his spiritual guide. Not only did Pieris dialogue with Buddhism by mastering its scriptural languages of Pali and Sanskrit, and through detailed study of its historical development, but he also submitted himself to intensive introspection for a fifteen-month period under a monk using Buddhist meditative techniques and training in mindfulness. He later described this time as “an important experience in my life – forgetting Christianity, to the point of denying it, to receive the fullness of the Buddhist kenosis.”<sup>56</sup> Out of such an in-depth encounter he came to claim that the best way of gaining knowledge about Buddhism, which would enable a fruitful dialogue to take place, is through participating in Buddhist practice under a learned monk.

Pieris refers to another encounter within the Sri Lankan context of the early 1970s that symbolised his own second baptism, this time in the life of the poor. The poor youth of Sri Lanka at the time had become disillusioned with Buddhist monks, who they accused of having comfortable lifestyles, and with the political authorities, who they thought cared little for their plight. They turned to Marxism. In this uncertain social climate, Pieris recounted meeting a student from a rural area who worked hard at studies but lived in great poverty. This was in contrast to the secure and comfortable lifestyle in Pieris’ own Jesuit house community. He tried to invite the youth for a meal, explaining that his Christian faith encouraged him to share his money with those less well off. The youth asked him where he received his money from, to which Pieris flippantly replied that it came from God. Later, the youth invited Pieris to Marxist meetings but Pieris lacked the courage to attend. Within a year there was a youth uprising in Sri Lanka (1971) and the student was killed in the forest. “His face still comes to me regularly,” wrote Pieris, “asking where I get my money.”<sup>57</sup> This encounter with the Buddhist/Marxist student was a decisive experience in Pieris’ understanding “of gross injustice, of religion conspiring with mammon, of building altars to mammon on the graves of the poor.”<sup>58</sup> This, together with his prior experience of immersion in the spirituality of the Buddhist religion through study and practice, convinced him of the need to abandon a theological teaching career in Europe and to set up his dialogue centre in Tulana near to a university. At the centre, he wrote, “The only question we ask is whether or not the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. It is not clear what Pieris means here by Buddhist ‘*kenosis*’ since this is a Christian theological term for the process of self-emptying. The context of the sentence suggests that he is referring to Buddhist truth, which is accessed through a process of self-emptying.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



student has taken his meal – and we share whatever we have.”<sup>59</sup> The encounter with the youth led him to live a simpler lifestyle and be as self-supporting as possible, while developing a commitment to working for social justice alongside the poor.

### ***Buddhist Contributions to Theological Method***

In several articles Pieris speaks of Buddhist influences on his theological method. An important element in this is the Buddhist emphasis on silence. Silence in Buddhism is central to its practice of meditation. It is counselled in its teachings when dealing with matters of speculative thought and heated discussion and, most notably, is stressed when it comes to speak of the nature of *nirvana*. Buddhism is “*The Way of Silence*” in contrast to Christianity, the “*Religion of the Word*,” wrote Pieris.<sup>60</sup> The Buddhist silence points to the essential mystery and unknowable nature that lies behind what Christians call God. This silence acts as a critique of all theological expressions of doctrine that claim to define the mystery, but in actual fact only end up confining and limiting God. Thus Buddhism, Pieris claimed, challenges Asian theology to approach talk about God with care; to seek a harmony between word and silence that recognises the mystical nature of God.<sup>61</sup> This emphasis on silence is integrated most clearly by Pieris in his liturgical celebrations of the Mass.<sup>62</sup>

Another central aspect of Buddhism that Pieris has learned and seeks to assimilate into an Asian theological method is the mutuality of praxis and theory that was referred to earlier. In Buddhism the path and the truth are inextricably related. This can be seen, he explained, by the way in which the teaching on the Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*) incorporates the Eightfold Path (*atthangika-magga*).<sup>63</sup> It is by treading the path that the truth is revealed. “It is time to impress on our theologians,” he wrote back in 1979, “that in our culture the *method* cannot be severed from the *goal*.”<sup>64</sup> More recently, he has written about how the Indic cultural context invites him to view theology in the following way:

In terms of dialectics between theory and praxis (*vidyā-carana*),  
between a view of life and a way of life (*darśana-pratipada*),  
between the salvific reality and its moral imperative (*dharma-*

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 146. Pieris had been teaching at the Gregorian University in Rome for a brief period in the early 1970s prior to returning to Sri Lanka.

<sup>60</sup> Pieris, “Doctrinal, Legal and Cultural Factors in Buddhist-Christian Mixed Marriages,” 105.

<sup>61</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 41.

<sup>62</sup> Pieris, “A Liturgical Anticipation,” 69-82.

<sup>63</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 47.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

*vinaya*), between the sovereign truth and the sovereign path (*āryasatya-āryamārgā*); and so on.<sup>65</sup>

This interdependent understanding of praxis and theory is for him what “defines the Asian sense in Theology.”<sup>66</sup> His own method of dialogue, especially when speaking of the need for baptism into Asian religiosity, also corresponds and is influenced with that found in Buddhism, where “study must lead to practice, and practice culminates in insight.”<sup>67</sup> This differs from the prominent method of theologising in the West that he described as a “*logos* model,”<sup>68</sup> where philosophical thought is dominant and where doctrine plays the central role in defining religious truth. The Buddhist understanding of the mutuality of belief and practice challenge theology in Asia to take a more holistic view of how truth is to be perceived and realised. Within the Buddhist context, Pieris points out that Christian practice will itself be seen as the main expression of its theology.

### ***The Liberative Core of Buddhism***

The significance Buddhism places on being a path to liberation impressed Pieris and encouraged him to develop a soteriological basis for interreligious dialogue in general. With his immersion in the Buddhist religion he came to appreciate that a basic thrust for liberation defined the aim of its teachings and practices. He then argued that liberation be considered as the meeting point for dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. Soteriology, rather than God, was seen to be the common concern of both religions. This understanding, combined with the emphasis on praxis in his theological method, had the effect of placing liberation, rather than doctrinal arguments, at the centre of his overall theological and dialogical concern.

The dedicated and thorough way in which Buddhism sought interior liberation, based on voluntary poverty, impacted greatly on Pieris’ theology. In Buddhism, he explained, “Wealth is at the service of *Poverty*, and poverty is the condition of liberation from acquisitiveness and greed.”<sup>69</sup> Buddhist teachings do not condemn wealth per se, since it is the wealth of the laity that supports the lives of the monks with donations of food, cloth and shelter. However, wealth is given a relative value.

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<sup>65</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Problem of Universality and Inculturation with Regard to Patterns of Theological Thinking,” in *Why Theology?* Concilium 1994/6, ed. Claude Geffré and Werner Jeanrond (London: SCM Press, 1994), 71.

<sup>66</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 47.

<sup>67</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 124.

<sup>68</sup> Pieris, “The Problem of Universality,” 72.

<sup>69</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 36.

Its primary purpose is for the support of family and community. Most importantly wealth is for the support of monastic life which, as Pieris described it, “*Constitutes the ‘institutional center’ as well as the ‘spiritual apex’ of a Buddhist community.*”<sup>70</sup> This monastic life, Pieris further explained, is committed to voluntary poverty, which Buddhists describe with words like “*Viraga* (detachment) and *alpicchata* (desiring only the basic minimum necessary for life)” together with terms like “*pabaja*” and “*Abhinikkamana*” that refer to leaving the security of home to become a mendicant.<sup>71</sup> Detachment is central to this Buddhist practice of voluntary poverty, and is nurtured through a process of self-analysis and by a simple and ethically based lifestyle. Yet it does not represent a fleeing from involvement in the world, Pieris asserted, but is akin to how ‘indifference’ operates within the Ignatian tradition.<sup>72</sup> Voluntary poverty enables the monk to overcome the forces of mammon working within, providing a foundation upon which to build a community based on compassion and justice. In this way, Pieris argued that voluntary poverty in Buddhism works as a “spiritual antidote” to mammon.<sup>73</sup> The poverty of the Buddhist monk, who owns very few personal possessions, is a symbol of that inner renunciation where greed, hatred and delusion have been overcome and the experience of interior liberation encountered.<sup>74</sup> This corresponds, he stated, to the first biblical axiom mentioned earlier; he described it as “the Buddhist equivalent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>75</sup>

The Buddhist practice of voluntary poverty is understood by Pieris to complement and add to the conception of voluntary poverty in Latin American liberation theology where it is seen as a political and pastoral strategy. He wrote:

The motivation for ‘voluntary poverty’ and renunciation, which liberation theology has so illuminatingly emphasized in the context of the social option, needs another dimension that the gnostic values of the East seem to demand: compassion, detachment, moderation, and inner peace. “Freedom from poverty” becomes an enslaving

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<sup>70</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Spirituality of the Buddhist Monk” [First published in *Inter Fratres* 27 (1977)], in *Love Meets Wisdom*, 61.

<sup>71</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Monastic Poverty in the Asian Setting,” *Dialogue* n.s. 7, no. 3 (1980): 104.

<sup>72</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Christian and the Buddhist Responses to the Pope’s Chapter on Buddhism,” *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995): 84-85.

<sup>73</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 43.

<sup>74</sup> Greed, hate and delusion are known as the three unwholesome roots in Buddhism that cause suffering. For Pieris’ assessment of these see Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 117.

<sup>75</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Religion and Slavery: A Strange Story,” *Dialogue* n.s. 23 (1996): iii. For a definition of the first biblical axiom see page 167 of this thesis.

pursuit if it is not tempered by the Asian belief in the “freedom that comes from poverty” – that is, freedom from mammon.<sup>76</sup>

In stressing the need for self-awareness to achieve this goal of freedom, the Buddha, according to Pieris, prefigured Freud and modern psychoanalysis in pointing out the ways in which selfish and inordinate desires corrupt the mind’s reason, leading to suffering and ultimately to social injustice.<sup>77</sup> This stress on interior liberation that Buddhism displays is something that Christians must take note of and learn from in their development of a theology of liberation.

Pieris is aware that the emphasis on renunciation in Buddhist teachings is open to criticism by people committed to liberation, who may see in it an overemphasis on self-denial. He is particularly sensitive to the possible critique of feminists on this point, who might consider such teaching to undermine the need for women to affirm their self-worth in the face of male domination. While acknowledging that feminism presents a “*permanent ideological critique of religion*”<sup>78</sup> that must lead to radical changes in both Buddhism and Christianity, he appealed for self-denial to remain as the most important of religious values. The problem, he argued, is not self-denial but the fact that men have never practised it in their relationships with women. Sexism, he claimed, is a result of the greed, hatred and delusion that the Buddhist seeks to overcome. Women should surely assert their own worth, he stated, but this must be tempered by the spirituality of self-denial that guards against an individualistic and materialistic ideology that he feared is behind much of Western feminism.<sup>79</sup>

### ***The Buddhist Social Vision***

Pieris is adamant that Buddhism is a religion which lays great stress on service to society and contains a social vision that makes it a natural dialogue partner for the Christian in developing a theology of liberation. Reflecting on the scriptural portrayal of the Buddha, he wrote:

The *Pāli* scriptures give ample testimony to the unprecedented authority with which he walked the streets and talked with people; his gentle persuasiveness which converted the harlot and the murderer; the diversity in his pedagogical approach to the rich merchant, to the poor artisan and to the sectarian philosopher; the

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<sup>76</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 40. For Pieris’ definition of ‘gnosis’ referring to the spiritual values of the East see page 184 of this thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Ideology and Religion: Some Debatable Points,” *Dialogue* n.s. 10, nos. 2 & 3 (1983): 36.

<sup>78</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Woman and Religion in Asia: Towards a Buddhist and Christian Appropriation of the Feminist Critique,” *Dialogue* n.s. 19 & 20 (1992-1993): 131.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-189.

sense of social righteousness with which he blazed when he demolished the theological basis of the caste-system; the competence with which he proclaimed to politicians the principles of good government; the practical wisdom of the ethical code he bequeathed to the laity to guide their social and even economic pursuits; and above all, the all embracing nature of the *Vinaya*, the monastic Regula, by which the monks could, in their single-minded pursuit of *Nirvāna*, serve any given secular society as beacons of light in the manner he himself was.<sup>80</sup>

The Buddha for Pieris was a man intimately concerned with the suffering of people and with their social lives.

With this understanding, Pieris argued that Buddhism could not be thought of as a world-denying religion serving only the narrow needs of a monastic elite. The transcendent and otherworldly aim of the religious life, *nirvana*, is balanced by the monks' pastoral involvement in the lives of the laity upon whom they depend for their very existence. In 1977 he wrote:

There is still in the vast majority of rural monasteries a genuine spirit of poverty and simplicity, scrupulous fidelity to the ancient injunctions of the Buddha, and very close contact with the poor peasants who are the real citizens of the Third World.<sup>81</sup>

That spirit has come under severe pressure from the global spread of capitalist values in recent decades. However, in the institution of the *Sangha* he perceived a socialist model of community that revealed the political leaning of the Buddha, and which still offers a possible alternative to the individualistic and materialist culture which is a product of global capitalism. The Buddha, he contended, could have chosen from two available models for the basic shape of the *Sangha* in his time. One was based on a monarchical structure that mirrored the emerging feudal society of the period; the other one was based on older tribal patterns of community, which were communitarian and socialist in character. The Buddha chose the latter. Monks were to come to decisions by consensus, there was to be no accumulation of personal wealth, and all things in the monastery were to be shared equally.<sup>82</sup> Pieris has also made studies of ancient Pali texts that provide evidence of the Buddha's awareness of social injustice and the need for the *Sangha* to represent an alternative society. Commenting on these texts, he wrote:

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<sup>80</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "The Political Vision of the Buddhists," *Dialogue* n.s. 11, nos. 1-3 (1984): 8.

<sup>81</sup> Pieris, "The Spirituality of the Buddhist Monk," 72.

<sup>82</sup> Pieris, "The Political Vision of the Buddhists," 10. The view that the *Sangha* supports a socialist model of society is also made by Trevor Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1966), 152.



Concealed beneath the mythical language of the *Aggañña Sutta*, *Cakkavatti-Sīhnāda-Suttanta*, and the *Kūṭanāda-Suttanta*, taken together, is the Buddha's explosive social message: that it is *taṇhā*—the acquisitive tendency, the accumulative instinct in the human heart—that generates all social evil; that it lays the foundation for the vicious idea of private property in place of the saner practice of common ownership. It thus brings about class divisions and absolute poverty, which lead to all types of human misery and have repercussions on the cosmos itself, affecting the quality of life and reducing the lifespan of humankind. Amid such a society, the monastic community ideally composed of greedless men and women presents itself as an eschatological community that symbolizes and even anticipates what *could* be everybody's future.<sup>83</sup>

As well as this recognition of the social role of the *Sangha*, several of Pieris' articles also provide details of the social and political involvement of Buddhist leaders and monks down the centuries.<sup>84</sup> This all serves to prove that wherever Buddhism flourished it has played an active role in the affairs of state and society.

'Buddhism of the texts' however, Pieris admitted, largely considers social justice as secondary to interior liberation, of which it is a consequence. In this respect he saw Buddhism as similar to mainstream Western Catholic thinking.<sup>85</sup> He pointed to a dangerous leaning within this viewpoint; that the concern for interior liberation will so dominate spirituality that the quest for social justice is devalued or lost altogether. A situation can then arise where Buddhist monks live a simple but secure life in their monasteries, unaware of or uninterested in social justice, while around them the poor struggle to survive. This happened in Mongolia, he recalled, where the lamaseries were purged by Soviet communism.<sup>86</sup> He contrasted this Buddhist and Catholic viewpoint with a biblical understanding, where God's covenant with the poor is emphasised. The Bible views sin and liberation, he argued, as both personal and structural at the same time. "Self-analysis alone," he cautioned, "is therefore inadequate to discern the contemporary strategies of mammon; social analysis must complement it."<sup>87</sup> To encourage the Buddhist to a deeper concern for the plight of the

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<sup>83</sup> Pieris, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?" 121. For more information on the three Pali scriptures to which Pieris refers here, see the Glossary of Buddhist Terms towards the end of the thesis. For in-depth textual exegesis of Buddhist scriptures in this area see Pieris, "The Political Vision of the Buddhists," 11-14. For a textual exegesis relating to the ideal relationship between state and religion as conceived in Buddhism see Aloysius Pieris, "The Mahāpurisa Ideal and the Principle of Dual Authority," *Dialogue* n.s. 23 (1996): 168-176.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, "Millenniarist Messianism in Buddhist History," in *Is The World Ending?* Concilium 1998/4, ed. Sean Freyne and Nicholas Lash (London: SCM Press, 1998), 106-115.

<sup>85</sup> Pieris, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?" 123.

<sup>86</sup> Pieris, "To be Poor as Jesus was Poor?" 195.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

poor, then, Pieris employed his understanding of the second biblical axiom,<sup>88</sup> as well as Marxist and feminist critiques.

Pieris is aware, though, of changes taking place within Buddhism, as in Christianity, towards the development of a more socially committed religious spirituality as seen in the Engaged Buddhist movement. The crucial factor in this development is that of the poor. As Buddhists seek to identify with the suffering of the poor they are led to new interpretations of their scriptures and traditions, much the same as is happening through liberation theology in Christianity. He provided the example of the 'Humanist Buddhist Monks' Association' in Sri Lanka, which was led to rediscover the social relevance of Buddhist scriptures through a costly identification with the rural poor in the Sri Lankan ethnic war. Hundreds of its members were murdered because of their identification with the victims of violence.<sup>89</sup> In another example he quoted a poem of a Buddhist from one of the scheduled castes in India, where the Buddha is depicted caring for the downtrodden of the earth:

"I see you  
Speaking and walking  
Amongst the humble and the weak  
Soothing away grief  
In the life-threatening darkness  
With torch in hand  
Going from hovel to hovel."<sup>90</sup>

Such examples are proof that Buddhism is undergoing radical change as it listens to the cry for justice from the poor, causing Buddhists to reinterpret their scriptures and re-envision the social role of religion.

In addition to the new social concern evident in Buddhism, Pieris also recommended that more attention be given to study of the popular Buddhism of the rural poor, whose cosmic religiosity is incorporated within an overall Buddhist belief system. Their 'this-worldly' attitude presents Buddhism with a challenge to take material needs seriously and to work against the social injustice that punishes the poor, marginalises women, and abuses the environment.<sup>91</sup> He provided a detailed example of how such folk Buddhism works as a force for healing and prophetic action within a poor, rural setting. Attending an exorcism of an evil spirit from a man

<sup>88</sup> The second biblical axiom is described on pages 167-168 of this thesis.

<sup>89</sup> Pieris, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?" 125-126; Aloysius Pieris, "The View from the Other Side," *Dialogue* n.s. 18, nos. 1-3 (1991): 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism," 129.

<sup>91</sup> For a description of how Pieris interprets the religiosity of the Asian poor see Pieris, "Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," 156-157.

in a remote village, he was struck by the way the community all gathered to participate and how, in the process of the lengthy exorcism, the social injustice of a local trader selling contaminated baby milk was exposed as one of the demons afflicting the village. He also pointed out the remarkable way in which the demon possessing the man was simply laughed out of existence by the community that believed in the all-encompassing power of the Buddha. This was an example of the liberating potential of Buddhism working together with the cosmic spirituality of the people.<sup>92</sup>

As evidence of the ways in which Buddhists and Christians have joined in a common liberative concern, Pieris refers to a few Buddhist-Christian groups. In several articles he gives the example of the Christian Workers Fellowship, mentioned in Chapter Two, with which he has a close association.<sup>93</sup> Groups like the CWF, operating in the Buddhist context, have shaped Pieris' understanding of the need for more basic human communities that as yet remain small in number. They show that engaging in a common concern for the poor can lead to a sharing of worship and profound dialogue in the area of beliefs. It is something that he himself engages in through the dialogue that takes place at his Tulana research centre.

In the Buddhist context, then, Pieris has discovered that an Asian theology of liberation can only come about when Christians insert themselves into the life of the poor and the liberative teachings of other religions. Dialogue with Buddhism has been an important factor in shaping his theological method, giving it an 'Asian sense.' It has also provided him with a deeper understanding of what constitutes liberation through its emphasis on voluntary poverty, and encouraged him to develop a soteriological basis to interreligious dialogue. In addition he points to the significance of the Buddhist social concern reflected in the life of the Buddha, encapsulated in the model of the *Sangha*, and practised by the Buddhist community down the centuries. He is aware though that a liberative Buddhist spirituality, experienced by him, is under pressure from consumerist values and is available in Asia only "as a flickering light rather than a blazing fire."<sup>94</sup> He has sought to integrate central aspects of this Buddhist spirituality into his own praxis and theology of Asian liberation, but he recognises there must be far greater Christian immersion in the Asian context before the church discovers and articulates such a theology.

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<sup>92</sup> The exorcism is recounted in Aloysius Pieris, "Prophetic Humour and the Exposure of demons: Christian Hope in the Light of a Buddhist Exorcism," *VJTR* 60, no. 5 (1996): 311-322.

<sup>93</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, "Dialogue and Distrust between Buddhists and Christians: A Report on the Catholic Church's Experience in Sri Lanka," *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995): 109-110.

<sup>94</sup> Pieris, "Whither the New Evangelism?" 150.

## 5.2.2 The Mission of the Church in Asia

### *Creating Local Churches 'of' Asia*

Christian mission in Asia has been an important theological concern in the writings of Pieris since the 1960s. He has, down the years, sought to understand and express the Christian faith in ways that make sense to Asians. In 1968 he spoke of the need for ““cultural assimilation”” of Buddhist and Hindu elements into Christian liturgy, with the aim of proclaiming the gospel through the thought framework of Indic religiosity.<sup>95</sup> The following decade saw him begin to emphasise in his theology the two aspects of religiosity and poverty that characterise the Asian context, and how an engagement with these must shape Christian mission. In the 1980s he developed biblical foundations and missiological principles to serve and encourage the Church in its dialogue with Asia's religions and its concern for the poor. However, with the inauguration of the ‘Decade of Evangelism’ and the Pope's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990, Pieris detected a return to a militant missiology in the Catholic Church, which was adopted by the Sri Lankan Catholic Church hierarchy.<sup>96</sup> He responded to this. “Evangelization is our top priority today,”<sup>97</sup> he said - but the evangelism he promotes is radically different from the emphasis on church expansion and personal conversion that he perceives coming from the Vatican. His missiological approach is non-proselytising and aimed at developing a common interreligious mission against mammon.

In the early 1980s Pieris spoke of a “mission crisis”<sup>98</sup> in the Catholic Church, as it struggled to come to terms with its past association with colonialism and a lack of respect for other religions. He explained that this was “basically an authority crisis”<sup>99</sup> resulting from a failure in discipleship. Christian mission in Asia had failed to understand and follow the way of Jesus in his poverty and humility; hence it lacked authority in the eyes of the Asian people. The result was the establishment of insignificant “local churches *in* Asia,” built by aggressive missionary methods, that were cut off from the mass of ordinary people; the church had not yet learned to establish “local churches *of* Asia.”<sup>100</sup> A paradigm shift in missionary thinking is

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<sup>95</sup> Pieris, “Liturgy and Dialogue with Buddhism,” 1.

<sup>96</sup> For Pieris' most recent criticisms of Vatican missiology see: “Dialogue and Distrust,” 104, 119-120; and Aloysius Pieris, “Redemptoris Missio,” in *Rerum Novarum: One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, Concilium, 1991/5, ed. John Coleman and Gregory Baum (London: SCM Press, 1991), xiii-xv. For reference to how the Catholic hierarchy in Sri Lanka has in recent years followed the Vatican emphasis on traditional forms of evangelism see Iddamaloda, “Interfaith Dialogue,” 328.

<sup>97</sup> Pieris, “Whither the New Evangelism?” 147.

<sup>98</sup> Pieris, “Asia's Non-Semitic Religions,” 81.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

required, argued Pieris, if the church is to fulfil its missionary mandate and establish true local churches *of* Asia. To that end he wrote of a need for “integral evangelism” based on “interreligious collaboration and liberation theology.”<sup>101</sup> His Asian theology of liberation is thus presented as a missionary theology.

To inform and inspire such a change of thinking in mission, Pieris often refers to the example of Jesus. Based on his interpretation of Matthew 23.15 where the Pharisees are criticised for converting people to their particular kind of religiosity, he claimed that Jesus stood against all proselytism.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, from early on he described Jesus’ missionary goal as the realisation of the kingdom of God,<sup>103</sup> which he later defined as the overcoming of mammon through interior renunciation (the liberative aspect of voluntary poverty) and the struggle against mammon in the social sphere (the enslaving aspect of forced poverty). These are the two biblical axioms which, for Pieris, stand at the heart of the Christian gospel to be preached in Asia. He also returned to lessons that could be learnt from the baptism of Jesus. From the baptism in the Jordan he drew out “four missiological principles for the local Churches *in* Asia.”<sup>104</sup> The first pointed to the use of discernment by Jesus in choosing to associate with the ascetic spirituality of John, rather than with the Pharisees, Zealots or others. Asian Christians too, in their missionary concern, must discern what constitutes a liberating spirituality from among the ideologies and religious traditions in their cultures, counselled Pieris. Secondly, as Jesus accepted John’s ascetic spirituality and also identified with the religious poor who flocked to John, so the church also, Pieris said, should be open to the spirituality of renunciation in Asian religions and at the same time identify with the concerns of the Asian poor. Thirdly, Pieris said that the humility of Jesus’ act in receiving baptism from John should lead Asian Christians to respectfully learn from the spirituality of other religions, and refrain from speaking of baptising them as if they were of little value. Lastly, he noted that it was only through an act of humble submission that Jesus was able to affirm his own unique identity, which went beyond John’s, as the Messiah and God’s beloved Son. Learning from this, Asian churches should not fear immersion in the plural religiosity of the poor in Asia; it is by this means that the “newness of Asian Christianity will appear.”<sup>105</sup> Recently, he has further commented that, in following Jesus, “the mission of the church is to be invisibly effective as *salt*

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<sup>101</sup> Pieris, “Whither the New Evangelism?” 150.

<sup>102</sup> Pieris, “Dialogue and Distrust,” 108.

<sup>103</sup> Pieris, “The Church, the Kingdom and Other Religions,” 3.

<sup>104</sup> Pieris, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions,” 87.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



(Mt 5:13), encouraging the religiousness and virtuousness indigenous to peoples of all faiths.”<sup>106</sup>

### ***Mission and Interreligious Dialogue***

Dialogue, which lies at the heart of Pieris’ missiology, does not, he recognised, come easily to the church. In a number of articles he is critical of the exclusivist theology of religions that has underpinned missionary endeavour down the ages. He also noted that a commitment to dialogue depended largely on the church’s association with power and its self-understanding. Hence the dialogical approach found in some Church Fathers when the church was a minority faith was forgotten, he complained, as the early Roman Church became identified with imperial power. The Church and kingdom of God were then identified as the one and same reality. The threat posed by the later spread of Islam simply “reinforced the church’s *renunciation of dialogue*.”<sup>107</sup> In an early article he spoke of how the “missiological mood” in the Roman Catholic Church had changed over the centuries.<sup>108</sup> A triumphal attitude that sought the “conquest” of other religions coincided with the Church’s support of colonial expansion and its own sense of self-importance.<sup>109</sup> Vatican II, however, ushered in a humbler self-understanding of the Church as sacrament of the kingdom of God. With this came a new openness to the work and presence of God beyond the Church in the world.<sup>110</sup> Pieris approved and developed this conception of the kingdom early on in his writing, saying that the missionary aim should seek a conversion of heart towards the value-system proclaimed by Jesus in the kingdom rather than seeking to convert all to Christianity.<sup>111</sup> Pieris is aware, though, that many Christians and much of church history oppose his understanding of the need for dialogue.

The kind of dialogue that Pieris calls for is the only way, he argues, that Christianity can make any impact on an Asian continent where the Christian presence is so small. Christianity, he explained, came too late to Asia. The cosmic

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<sup>106</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka during the First Fifty Years of the Country’s Independence,” *Dialogue* n.s. 25 & 26 (1998-1999): 249.

<sup>107</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 22.

<sup>108</sup> Pieris, “The Church, the Kingdom and Other Religions,” 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. In this article Pieris examines “four missiological moods.” Each mood reflects a different theological attitude to other religions and a new understanding of the relationship between the Church and ‘kingdom of God.’ These begin with the “Conquest Theory” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and finish with the “Sacramental Theory” from the 1960s onwards; both discussed here. The other two intervening models are the “Adaptation Theory” and the “Fulfilment Theory.”

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

religions of the people, where most converts are made, had already been subsumed under the metacosmic spirituality of Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, when Christianity appeared. The way forward for Christian mission, he therefore argued, is not in a forlorn attempt to woo Asians to Christianity, which still seems like a foreign import from the West to them, but to appreciate and work “within the ‘soteriological’ perspectives of Asian religions.”<sup>112</sup> This proposal differs from the approach of inculturation that tries to adopt and adapt appealing ideas from Asian religions. He complained that merely taking attractive philosophical concepts from other religions - as Western theology did with Greek thought - without reference to the soteriological basis and religious life behind these amounts to “theological vandalism.”<sup>113</sup> The term “enreligionisation” better describes his approach: participation in the other’s religious world to appreciate its own inner dynamics.<sup>114</sup> He defined, following Raimundo Panikkar, three levels of religion: the “primordial experience” of liberation that occurred in the founders of religions; the “collective memory of that experience” kept alive through religious traditions and practices; and the “interpretation of that experience” through philosophical and theological thought.<sup>115</sup> Dialogue has remained mainly on the third level. He advocated that people involved in dialogue should engage on the second level in order to access the liberative core of the other religion. This is what he calls a ‘*communicatio in sacris*’. This mode of interreligious dialogue, he claimed, will lead to a deeper awareness of the other and provide the insight upon which to reformulate theology and missiology in a way that reflects the Asian ethos.

The most fruitful possibilities for a ‘*communicatio in sacris*’ between the religions are seen by Pieris to exist between Christian and Asian monastics. He explained that liberation in Asian religions is understood and expressed in terms of “gnosis,” defined as “the liberating knowledge of Saving Truth dawning on a person already disposed toward its reception by a process of self-purification or renunciation.”<sup>116</sup> Christian monastics in the West have since earliest times, he said, embraced such *gnostic* spirituality. They have analysed the inner movement of thoughts and desires in the mind, have spoken of salvation in terms of wisdom and mystical insight, and placed great emphasis on outward renunciation. So Christian monastics are best able to appreciate and appropriate the Asian understanding of

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<sup>112</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Western Models of Inculturation: Applicable to Asia?” [First published in *East Asian Pastoral Review* 22 (1985)], in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 55.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>115</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 120.

<sup>116</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “East in the West: Resolving a Spiritual Crisis,” in *Love Meets Wisdom*, 10.

liberation. However, he warned that Christians involved in dialogue should not be engaged in an uncritical absorption of Asian religious thought. In applauding the pioneering work of Swami Abishiktenanda and Bede Griffiths, Pieris commended their “**critical loyalty** to their Christian monastic identity as well as **critical participation** in the monastic ethos of their Hindu counterparts.”<sup>117</sup> Such critical dialogue, according to Pieris, would have many benefits. It would enable Christians to comprehend God and salvation in *gnostic* terms and encourage a more holistic spirituality. In practical terms this would lead to a deeper appreciation of the world’s environment, since *gnostic* religions have emphasised the interrelatedness of all life.<sup>118</sup> It would also help to recover the *gnostic* monastic spirituality of the West that has failed to filter into mainstream Christian theological expression. However, he recognised that Western theologians are suspicious of *gnosis* because of its association with Gnostic heresies in the early church and so are likely to misinterpret the language of both Western monasticism and of Asian religions. Before the church can evangelise in Asia, however, he claimed it must learn from the liberative experience and knowledge of other religious traditions. Only then will the church be able to fulfil its missionary aim to speak a meaningful word to the peoples of Asia who cling to their religious traditions.

### ***Mission and the Poor***

The missionary aim of dialogue, Pieris warned, is misguided if it is not interwoven with a concern for the poor. He referred again to the example of Jesus who chose voluntary poverty in order to identify with the poor and oppressed. The mission of Jesus was thus “a mission *by* the poor and a mission *for* the poor.”<sup>119</sup> He added, “This is the truth about evangelisation, which the local churches *in* Asia find hardest to accept.”<sup>120</sup> It is the missiological meaning contained within the second baptism of Jesus on the cross. He wrote:

This is where the journey, begun at Jordan, ended. When true religion and politics join hands to awaken the poor, then Mammon too, makes allies with religion and politics to conspire against the

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<sup>117</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Monastic Conference at Kandy on Asian Poverty,” *Dialogue* n.s. 7, no.3 (1980): 97. Pieris refers to the pioneering example of Thomas Merton in several other articles.

<sup>118</sup> Pieris, “East in the West,” 12-15. Pieris argued that Christians have ‘desacralised’ the earth because of a belief in God as standing above and beyond the world. As a result they see nature as an instrument to be used rather than revered. The *gnostic* religions, despite seeing the Ultimate Reality in non-personal terms, emphasise interrelatedness. This has also been shaped by their integration of cosmic spirituality, which is much more rooted in a relationship to the earth.

<sup>119</sup> Pieris, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions,” 90.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

evangeliser. Religion and politics must go together – whether *for* God or *against* God.<sup>121</sup>

This political interpretation of the cross is further supported by his reflections on christology, especially in relation to Matthew 25.31-46 where Jesus affirms his presence in the suffering of the poor, who act as God's judges upon the nations and means of deliverance for the world.<sup>122</sup> With this understanding, Pieris provocatively stated that the main problem of Christian mission in Asia is that "the Theologians are not (yet) poor; and the poor are not (yet) theologians!"<sup>123</sup> In order to become truly missionary he called upon the church to disassociate itself from money and power, and work for social justice.

Pieris stressed that evangelism, understood in terms of preaching a message of liberation, could only be done after the church itself had been evangelised by the Asian poor. Then the church could be *of* the poor as well as *for* the poor in Asia. The first stage in this evangelism, according to him, is inculturation. "Inculturation is not an archaeological exercise of returning to Asia's cultural past," he explained, "but an awakening of the church to Asia's present realities."<sup>124</sup> The paradox for the church is that the 'Word' she is to inculturate is already present in the poor as God's judge of her spirituality. Inculturation is immersion, therefore, in the lives of the Asian poor, in their poverty and plural religiosity. It is the act of listening and learning from the poor, of being evangelised by them, so that the church will in turn be able to evangelise them by making them aware of their covenant relationship with God. This can only happen, according to Pieris, when Christians adopt the spirituality of Jesus based on renunciation and denunciation of mammon in all its forms.

The Christian missionary in following the spirituality of Jesus finds a "common platform"<sup>125</sup> with Asian religions, Pieris said, which have made a virtue of renunciation of mammon central to their religious ethos. It is ironic, he commented, that Western Christianity with all its associations with money and power should seek to convert Asian religions that have valued renunciation so much. The church can never hope to root itself in the Asian soil, he stated, "Unless it accepts the 'evangelical role' that other religions can play in summoning the church back to the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, "Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians," in *Christianity Among World Religions*, Concilium: Religion in the Eighties, ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 65.

<sup>123</sup> Pieris, "Asia's Non-Semitic Religions," 84.

<sup>124</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia: A Theological Reflection on an Experience" [First published in *Jahrbuch für Kontextuelle Theologie* (Frankfurt: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1994)], in *Fire and Water*, 127.

<sup>125</sup> Pieris, "Whither the New Evangelism?" 150.

spirituality of Jesus!”<sup>126</sup> The “specific mission”<sup>127</sup> unique to Jesus, which he places upon the church, comes from his denunciation of mammon and identification with the cause of the poor and oppressed. Yet, even here the missionary must first of all listen and learn from the poor and their religiosity in order to speak a prophetic and liberating word.

Evangelism, Pieris stressed, always takes place in a political context. In Asia the way forward is for Christian mission to learn from the models of ‘religious socialism’ found still in rural areas, where Asian monastics and the rural poor share in daily life. His call, then, is for the church to discern the “liberative streams of Asian religiosity”<sup>128</sup> among the poor, and to plunge into it. He wrote:

Hence our final appeal to the local Churches *in* Asia: Harden not your hearts; Enter into the stream at the point where the religiosity of the Asian poor (represented by the peasants) and the poverty of the Religious Asians (reflected in our monks) meet to form the ideal community of total sharing, the ‘religious socialism’ which, like the early Christian Communism, can be swallowed up in the jungle of Asian feudalism as well as Western ideologies and theologies.<sup>129</sup>

This is the work being carried out by basic human communities on the fringe of the institutional church. In such communities, Christians seek to draw from the spiritual resources of Asian peoples while sharing their own spirituality in a common mission with and for the poor. It is where interreligious dialogue and liberation theology come together for the furtherance of mission in Asia, and results for Christians in an Asian theology of liberation.

### ***A Personal Mission to Interpret Buddhism for Christians***

Buddhism, as a missionary religion that has spread across Asia, is seen by Pieris to present Christian theology with a major challenge. He wrote:

Buddhism is the most Asian among the world religions. It is not only thoroughly Indian, but is equally at home in Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan and other diverse linguistic and racial groups in Asia – something that cannot be said of Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, or even Islam. Besides, it originated as a critique of (all) theology, and therefore presents itself as a counter-thesis to

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>128</sup> Pieris, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions,” 90.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



traditional Christianity. For this very reason it deserves the church's attention and demands a theological response.<sup>130</sup>

He has made it part of his own life's mission to try and understand Buddhism in its own terms and to discover the liberational core of its teachings. To this end he has contributed to Buddhist scholarly works and is respected by Buddhists for his understanding of their religion.<sup>131</sup> The Jesuit Provincial who sent him to study Buddhism over thirty years ago reminded him that he was entering "uncharted ground" and that he would one day be their "guide" in this field.<sup>132</sup> Since then Pieris has indeed acted as a guide for Christians to understand Buddhism and explore areas of mutual concern and theological challenge. This comes across as a particular missionary enterprise of his – to inform the wider church of the liberative teachings of Buddhism, correcting misinterpretations of each other's religion, and investigating ways of working together.

Christians are the intended audience for most of Pieris' writing on Buddhism. In the 1970s he wrote a number of articles explaining Buddhist themes. He provided detailed explanations of fundamental doctrines in Buddhist teaching and how the experience of liberation in Buddhism is understood,<sup>133</sup> as well as taking note of the positive spirituality that could be found in the popular Buddhism of rural folk. He also wrote about the way of life of Buddhist monks and the active social role they have played throughout history.<sup>134</sup> Many more of his writings deal with exploring differences and commonalties between Buddhism and Christianity on the ethical, social, mystical and theological levels. When reflecting on issues such as inculturation, evangelism or theology of religions, he usually weaves his dialogue with Buddhism into the discussion. As well as this Christian-Buddhist interchange, several of his articles bring both religions into a dialogue with Marxism and feminism to explore the mutual challenges that they present to each other.<sup>135</sup> The impression given is that his intellectual and daily life is a constant interaction between his Christian faith and the Buddhist religion.

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<sup>130</sup> Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism," 18.

<sup>131</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, "The Notions of Citta, Attā and Attabhāva in the Pāli Exegetical Writings," in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, ed. Somaratna Balasooriya and others (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980), 213-222.

<sup>132</sup> Pieris, "The Responsibilities of the CMRS in Sri Lanka Today," 584.

<sup>133</sup> For example see the explanation of Buddhist doctrine and experience of salvation in Aloysius Pieris, "Buddhism as Doctrine, Institution and Experience," *Dialogue* o.s. 27 & 28 (1973): 3-11.

<sup>134</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, "Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka – The Role of the Sinhala Monk," *Dialogue* n.s. 3, no. 3 (1976): 113-116.

<sup>135</sup> For example, see: Aloysius Pieris, "Buddhism and Marxism in Dialogue: A Comment on Dr. Dharmasiri's Paper," *Dialogue* n.s. 12, nos. 1-3 (1985): 68-86; Pieris, "Woman and Religion in Asia," 119-203.

Pieris is also committed to exposing Western and Christian misconceptions of Buddhism. He was, for example, critical of Western scholars in the last century who interpreted Buddhism as an abstract philosophical system revolving around doctrinal formulations, which they used in their anti-Christian polemic. Such an understanding, part of what has been called 'Protestant Buddhism,' was exported back to Asia and used by Buddhists to attack Christian missions.<sup>136</sup> He condemned this as a "dry, doctrinaire *philosophy* with no *religious* sap to make it live."<sup>137</sup> A few years ago he became embroiled in the controversy surrounding the Pope's visit to Sri Lanka in 1995. As mentioned earlier, the Pope had stated, in an extract from a book published in a Sri Lankan newspaper, that Buddhism had a "*negative soteriology*"<sup>138</sup> which saw the world as evil and the source of suffering; liberation involved fleeing from the world. Pieris complained that the Pope had fundamentally misrepresented Buddhism, distorting it to make it look inferior, and he called upon the Pope to apologise to Buddhists.<sup>139</sup> He also attacked the Sri Lankan Church hierarchy for their attempts to explain away the Pope's words. Buddhism, he pointed out, did not consider the world to be evil but saw the cause of suffering as lust, hatred and delusion or greed. Compared to the Christian mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, mentioned as being more world-affirming by the Pope, he argued that the Buddha was much more world-affirming. While the Christian mystics remained enclosed in their monasteries, Pieris reminded the Pope, the Buddha was involved in his ministry to the common people. As well as these Christian misconceptions, to a lesser extent but with no less certainty, Pieris is also critical of what he sees as wrong interpretations of Christianity by Buddhists.<sup>140</sup>

### ***Learning from Buddhist Interpretations of Jesus***

Dialogue with Buddhists has influenced the method of mission adopted by Pieris. He recalled a visit in the late 1960s from Shree Charles de Silva, a Buddhist

<sup>136</sup> 'Protestant Buddhism' was a term coined by two Sri Lankan anthropologists, Gananath Obeyesekere and Kitsiri Malalgoda, to describe a form of Buddhism that developed in Sri Lanka in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries where Buddhists adopted practices and ideas from Christian missionaries in order to reform Buddhism (for example, with establishment of the Young Men's Buddhist Association) and, moreover, to criticise and combat Christian missions (for example, by the printing of anti-Christian pamphlets). Mahinda Deegalle, "A Bibliography on Sinhala Buddhism," *JBE* 4 (1997): 218-219 [journal on-line]; available from <ftp://scorpio.gold.ac.uk/pub/jbe/vol4/deeg1.pdf>; Internet; accessed 10 February 2000. See also Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 172-197.

<sup>137</sup> Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism," 30.

<sup>138</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Buddha?" *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995): 1.

<sup>139</sup> Pieris' own statements and a survey of various Buddhist-Christian responses to the Pope's comments on Buddhism can be found in Aloysius Pieris, "The Christian and the Buddhist Responses to the Pope's Chapter on Buddhism," 62-95.

<sup>140</sup> For example, see Pieris "God-Talk and God-Experience in a Christian Perspective," 116-128.

scholar and poet known for his life of “evangelical poverty.”<sup>141</sup> Charles de Silva had gone to study passion plays performed by the Catholic community in Sri Lanka, but was sadly disappointed in the way they depicted Christ. So he set about writing his own passion play which he later gave Pieris to read. Pieris tells how he was deeply moved by the text. Even when the church fails to express the Word through its liturgy and life, he commented, the passion play of the Buddhist was an example of how that same Word “still makes sense to the simple and wise Asians who have an inner affinity with the universal Spirit that speaks in all of us.”<sup>142</sup> He pointed out how the Buddhist cultural idiom used by Charles de Silva made “Christ shine in Asian splendour.”<sup>143</sup> From then on he changed his method of mission from one of trying to tell Buddhists who Jesus was to, first of all, inviting Buddhists to tell him who Jesus is for them. He complained that for too long the church in Asia had been busy proclaiming and talking about the Word, and failed to see and listen to its presence among the Buddhist people.

It is not just any Buddhist that Pieris invites to speak about Jesus but those who are sincere in their own religious practice, who have a concern for the poor, and who take time to study Christian scripture and engage in dialogue. Another example he provided of how such a sensitive Buddhist could contribute to an understanding of Jesus is found in a life-sized cement embossment of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples sculptured by a Buddhist monk, the Ven. Hatigammana Uttarananda, for the centre in Tulana. The disciples are depicted like Buddhist monks on their alms round, entering into the home of Jesus with bowls in hand. Two women, one high and one low caste, are also present. Jesus is depicted as the “slave of the slaves” in the way he washes his disciples’ feet.<sup>144</sup> The Buddhist monk, by depicting Jesus as a servant who cares also for women and people of different castes, presented Jesus as a living protest against the injustices of feudal society. The monk was able, according to Pieris, to point to the uniqueness of Christ - his identification with the poor and wretched of society. Pieris commented:

Evangelization which ignores this dimension ignores what is inalienably distinctive in our faith. The non-Christian recognized this feature as something not duplicated in other religions.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Pieris, “Inculturation in Asia,” 131.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Pieris does not reproduce or give much detail about the play, which was written in the Sinhala language.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

He said that the monk's art has led him to reinterpret the significance of the incarnation in the passage of Philippians 2:6-11 about the *kenosis* of Christ. He began to understand that the text was not so much about the relationship of divine and human natures in Jesus, as he had presumed before, but rather about God's identification with the slaves of the earth through Jesus.

Another example of the Ven. Hatigammana Uttarananda's art work at Tulana, this time a painting that links the death of Jesus to the 1983 massacre of Tamils in Sri Lanka, is referred to by Pieris. The image led Pieris to question the traditional Christian understanding of the atonement. He wrote:

Here the Buddhist asks a very serious question about our atonement theory. We are accustomed to ask the misleading question "Why did Jesus die?" and we answer, "He died for our sins." Surely, he did not die of old age or disease! Could a more complete answer be ever given to that wrong question? The monk is making us ask the proper question: Why was Jesus murdered? This is the question which, when answered, brings out the liberational thrust of the paschal mystery.<sup>146</sup>

He went on to give more examples of how Buddhists at Tulana have caused him and other Christians to reflect on the significance of Jesus and the role of the church in mission. These have reinforced his call for a rethinking of missionary strategy. In order to proclaim the Christian gospel, he holds that the church must first of all enter into a dialogue with those Buddhists who display both a deep interior spirituality and a concern for the suffering masses of the poor. This will enable Christians not only to speak of Jesus in an idiom that Buddhists can understand but lead to renewed understandings of who Jesus is and the kind of mission to which he calls Christians.

### ***Buddhists and Christians as 'Co-pilgrims' in a Common Mission***

The understanding of Pieris that Christians can enter into a common mission with people of other religions comes mainly from his dialogue with Buddhism. Buddhahood, he wrote, is always conceived of as a complementary combination "of *paññā* and *karuṇā*: 'renunciation' of the world in search of an otherworldly *knowledge* and 'involvement' with the world through selfless *love* for its people."<sup>147</sup> Buddhism is hence a missionary religion that out of *karuna* (compassion) seeks to lead people to *panna* (wisdom). The aspect that gives Buddhism its "missionary

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>147</sup> Pieris, "The Spirituality of the Buddhist Monk," 67.

*efficacy*”<sup>148</sup> in Pieris’ opinion is the poverty of its monks, which involves a simplicity of lifestyle, a sharing of life with the rural poor, and the mental endeavour to overcome the forces of selfishness working within the human mind. This corresponds, as mentioned earlier, to the first biblical axiom posited by Pieris. An in-depth dialogue with Buddhism, then, recognises the basis for a common mission that aims at interior liberation from the powers of selfishness and greed. Since this spirituality of renunciation has been emphasised down the centuries in Buddhist traditions, Buddhism stands in a position to evangelise Christians, whose missionary history has been more associated with power and money, in the need for an interior conversion of heart and return to the original spirituality of Jesus.<sup>149</sup> Christians, then, need to acknowledge the liberative dimensions of the Buddhist *gnostic* spirituality and incorporate it within their missionary strategy.

While acknowledging the Buddhist challenge of voluntary poverty in developing a common mission, Pieris asserted that Christianity complements this by portraying Jesus as “the New Covenant, i.e. a defence pact between God and the Poor against the prevailing Order of Mammon.”<sup>150</sup> This is the second biblical axiom that prompts the church to a healing and prophetic mission, where love (*agape*) for the poor leads to knowledge (*gnosis*) of God. As well as Christians recognising the *gnostic* spirituality of Buddhism, Buddhists would also then need to recognise the Christian emphasis on a spirituality of ‘love’ that seeks to know and serve God in the faces of the poor and oppressed. Pieris has pointed out that though this is a unique characteristic of Christian faith it could yet be found in ‘seed’ form in Buddhism. More than any other *gnostic* Asian religion, he wrote, Buddhism contains an “explosive social message.”<sup>151</sup> As referred to earlier, his exposition of Buddhist texts shows that there is a deep concern for social justice. Furthermore, his studies of messianic movements in Buddhist history, especially in China, revealed a “revolutionary potential in Buddhism, which certainly has a social gospel, too.”<sup>152</sup> Christians and Buddhists are able, therefore, to become “co-pilgrims”<sup>153</sup> on a journey that embraces a spirituality of renunciation in order to stand alongside the poor in their struggle for justice.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>149</sup> Pieris, “Whither the New Evangelism?” 150-151.

<sup>150</sup> Pieris, “Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians,” 65.

<sup>151</sup> Pieris, “A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?” 121.

<sup>152</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Millenniarist Messianism in Buddhist History,” in *Is The World Ending?* Concilium 1998/4, ed. Sean Freyne and Nicholas Lash (London: SCM Press, 1998), 114.

<sup>153</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 135.



Out of this understanding of being co-pilgrims there arises, according to Pieris, a “*missionary mandate*” to develop basic human communities where Buddhists and Christians share their religious beliefs and practices in a common search for liberation focussed on the poor.<sup>154</sup> When this occurs, Christian mission will no longer be viewed as a threat by Buddhists, but seen as something in which they also can participate. Such a mission is what Pieris himself has been engaged in from early on in Sri Lanka, and this has involved him in criticism of both religions. He has associated with Buddhist youth and workers’ organisations in their struggles for justice, while being critical of the Catholic Church’s association with privilege and power in Sri Lanka.<sup>155</sup> He has also worked with Buddhist scholars in searching the Pali canon for the liberative message of the Buddha, while denouncing the Buddhist establishment for its support of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka.<sup>156</sup> A critical dialogue between the religions, not rivalry, is the way forward. “Rivalry, if there is one,” he wrote, “has to consist in mutually encouraging one another on this path of interior freedom. It is the absence of these values that has been economically organized as globalization.”<sup>157</sup>

In several articles Pieris refers to examples of basic human communities in Sri Lanka where Buddhists and Christians participate in a common mission for liberation. As well as the CWF he recently mentioned the *Samagi-sandhayana* group, which was inspired by the Catholic charismatic movement to work for social justice with the poor but then came to find affinity with Buddhists and others in this work.<sup>158</sup> They have been an example of what Pieris believes to be the true meaning of inculturation and Christian mission in Asia. He wrote:

Inculturation is that which makes the church a *lamp* on a stand, which illumines the place, so that the believers of all religions can articulate their own liberative aspirations more clearly in its light: the lamp fails in its mission when it blares in the faces of all, blinding their sight irritatingly.<sup>159</sup>

Another example, often mentioned by Pieris as a pioneer in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, was the Catholic priest Michael Rodrigo. Pieris wrote warmly of Rodrigo’s

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<sup>154</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Globalization: Buddhists and Christians in a World Colonized by the Market,” *Dialogue* n.s. 24 (1997): iv.

<sup>155</sup> For example, see Aloysius Pieris, “Catholic Education and the Rehabilitation of the Misguided,” *Outlook* (Colombo) 4 (1971): 8-12.

<sup>156</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Faith Communities and Communalism” [First published in *East Asia Pastoral Review* 3 & 4 (1989)], in *Fire and Water*, 111.

<sup>157</sup> Pieris, “Globalization,” iv.

<sup>158</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Inculturation as a Missionary/Evangelical Preserve in a Religiously Plural Society: Two Examples from Sri Lanka,” *VJTR* 60, no. 3 (1996): 151-152.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

“*dialogue of life*”<sup>160</sup> at the village level where the needs of the poor took priority but which also fostered a profound dialogue on the religious level. He described the way in which Rodrigo integrated his Christian faith and respect for Buddhism:

The life he risked losing by following Jesus was a life made noble by the eightfold path. The path of the Buddha, for this Christian priest, was the Sermon on the Mount anticipated by five centuries! In his view, therefore, even the most pious desire to convert the Buddhists to the church (rather than to the *Dhamma*, the realm of righteousness) was a misdirected zeal. Sri Lanka could offer no better gift to the rest of the world than a community of Buddhists who embody the teachings of their Founder. So he thought. In fact he preached the *Dhamma* through poems and plays. His simple dress, his frugal diet and his gentle demeanour were a clearly readable sign of his total assimilation of the Buddhist spirit, the spirit of Gautama the Recluse.<sup>161</sup>

Rodrigo’s witness and conception of mission is clearly something Pieris identified with and admired.

In a similar vein to Rodrigo, from early on Pieris has stood for a “*non-proselytizing*” mission among Buddhists.<sup>162</sup> In 1980 he wrote:

Vocation to the church, I believe, is a ministry conferred on a few (‘the little flock’) to confirm and strengthen in others the universal thrust of the kingdom already operative in them. It is only we who deal with good, practising Buddhists in our daily life who know how the kingdom preached by Christ has already germinated in them and how our encouragement to make them better Buddhists would imply a true furthering of the kingdom in them and their environment – except in the case of one who clearly receives the vocation to the church – that is, to be a sacramental expression of the kingdom.<sup>163</sup>

Conversion to the values of the kingdom of God, expressed later in terms of the two biblical axioms, is all that is required for salvation. “The role of the church,” in relation to the kingdom, “is to serve it where it is found” in the lives of Buddhists and people of other religions.<sup>164</sup> He realised that his missiological approach is directly opposed to that which defines mission as “*procuring a place for Christ in Asia*,”<sup>165</sup> through church expansion and the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity.

<sup>160</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The One Path of Liberation and the Many Religions,” *Dialogue* n.s. 13 & 14 (1986-87): 3.

<sup>161</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Reverend Father Michael Rodrigo: A Pioneer in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” *Dialogue* n.s. 15, nos. 1-3 (1988): 2.

<sup>162</sup> Pieris, “Christ and Our Mission: In the Light of the Value-System Revealed to Israel and to the Church as Against Today’s Dominant System,” 17.

<sup>163</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 34.

<sup>164</sup> Pieris, “The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka,” 249.

<sup>165</sup> Pieris, “Does Christ Have a Place in Asia?” 43.

Instead, he proclaimed “*Christ as the one who has no place in Asia*,”<sup>166</sup> the one whom the masses of Asia do not recognise by faith and yet whom Pieris sees as intimately bound up in their struggles for liberation through their own Buddhist traditions.

The mission of the church in Asia then, for Pieris, consists of two essential elements. It is for the church to recognise and assimilate the liberative spirituality of other religions followed by Asia’s poor, and to wear itself out in serving the hidden Christ in the poor through a ministry of healing and prophetic action for justice. Buddhism, which he has made his personal mission to interpret and defend against misinterpretation, has greatly influenced this thinking on mission. The spirituality of voluntary poverty it displays is seen as reinforcing the first biblical axiom, encouraging Christians to recognise and learn from its liberative teachings. This and its social concern have convinced him that a common mission based on the two biblical axioms is desirable and taking place in some basic human communities. His dialogue has also led him to conceive a non-proselytising approach in mission, where the act of listening to the other’s interpretation of Jesus comes prior to proclamation of him. This has provided Pieris with new insights into the person of Jesus and led him to reinterpret the meaning of the incarnation and to question atonement theory. Dialogue with Buddhism has thus deepened his commitment to the poor and to interreligious dialogue, seeing them as two aspects of a mission for liberation in Asia.

### 5.2.3 The Theology of Religions

#### *Understanding Jesus in Asia*

The relationship between Christianity and Asian religions has been a dominant theological concern of Pieris throughout his writing career. It has not, however, resulted in a systematic and philosophical presentation of a theology of religions. Rather than concentrating his energies on presenting a new and comprehensive hypothesis, he has sought to develop a fresh approach to the issues involved.

It is possible to find clues to the kind of theology of religions Pieris holds through studying the various images and concepts he has used to speak of Jesus.<sup>167</sup> In

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> In the five images of Christ that follow here I have made use of Philip Gibbs’ classification given in his short study of Pieris’ christology. Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, 184-189

the early period of his theological writing he spoke of the sacramental presence of Jesus as a hidden and saving reality in other religions. Here his thought was representative of developments happening within the Roman Catholic Church of the time, connected with the more open attitude towards other religions adopted by the Second Vatican Council and also the notion of 'anonymous Christianity' associated with Karl Rahner.<sup>168</sup> The religions of Asia were considered to have a sacramental quality, displayed in their orientation to values associated with the kingdom of God. In the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting the growing influence of liberation theology in Asia, he emphasised the human nature of Jesus and his identification with the poor. This resulted in the Jesus of the two biblical axioms as outlined earlier. In the late 1980s and 1990s he began to speak in terms of the cosmic Christ, in ways similar to Teilhard de Chardin to whom he often refers.<sup>169</sup> The search for salvation within this christology was seen as humanity's journey towards "christogenesis,"<sup>170</sup> a transformation of the human society to one of love and justice, where Jesus only becomes fully Christ when all become "christified in him."<sup>171</sup> More recently he has spoken of the "Asian Christ,"<sup>172</sup> also called the "non-Christian Christ,"<sup>173</sup> who is to be found among the Asian poor in their suffering and desire for justice. This amounts to what he described as a liberation christology that can be found operative in basic human communities and seen within Dalit, Minjung and Feminist theologies in Asia. Also in recent years, he has spoken about Jesus as the manifestation of the 'Word.' In this image he has emphasised the role of the Spirit in witnessing to the Word, among Christians and people of other religions.<sup>174</sup>

None of the above christologies is meant to be an exhaustive portrait of Jesus. They reflect his attempt to articulate a christology that arises out of his immersion in the Asian context. Since this immersion has been a long process, the images of Jesus it has engendered receive different emphases according to the time and issues being addressed in his theology, and they often overlap. Two common aspects of these images do stand out, however, and these reflect Pieris' missionary concern. Firstly,

<sup>168</sup> For example, see Pieris, "The Church, the Kingdom and Other Religions," 3-7. For Rahner's theology relating to anonymous Christians see Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 115-134.

<sup>169</sup> For an example of de Chardin's understanding of the Cosmic Christ see: Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1965; London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 39-51.

<sup>170</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "The Vows as Ingredients of Authentic Humanism: An Autobiographical Essay on the Religious Vows" [First published in *VJTR* 56 (1992)], in *Fire and Water*, 197.

<sup>171</sup> Pieris, "The Spirit Dimension of Change," *The Way* 28, no. 1 (1988): 36.

<sup>172</sup> Pieris, "Does Christ Have a Place in Asia?" 37.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>174</sup> Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia," 128.

he emphasises that Jesus is God's covenant with the poor and oppressed, and the salvation he offers is intrinsically social and ethical in nature. Secondly, behind his christological formulations seems to lie a desire to find words and images that will complement and challenge rather than compete with the claims of other religions. He has in the main sought to avoid using philosophical terms to define Jesus as a unique and superior saving reality in relation to other religions. He stresses that God's struggle against mammon and identification with the poor are what primarily define the "message and person" of Jesus,<sup>175</sup> qualities that can be recognised to different degrees in other religions.

Two Western christologies, which have dominated the Asian church, are heavily criticised by Pieris. The 'Chalcedonian model,' which sees Jesus through the eyes of Greek philosophy, is considered by Pieris to be too abstract. It presents a metaphysically defined Jesus who lacks relevance to the suffering of the Asian poor. The popular missionary model of 'Christ the King,' which stresses Christ's power and lordship, is seen as a contradiction of the emphasis Jesus placed on humility and sacrificial service. It presents a Jesus who is more representative of Western colonial attitudes of the past than biblical values.<sup>176</sup> A genuine Asian christology will arise in contrast to these two models, argued Pieris, not from the centre of the official church and its theologians but from the periphery of the church. It will be a theory built upon praxis and humility, where Christians have opted to insert themselves into the lives of the Asian poor and their religiosity.<sup>177</sup> He mentions two important elements in developing such a christology. The first is baptismal immersion in the context of Asia's religiosity and poverty so that "Asian cultures will open their repertoire of titles, symbols, and formulas to express their new discovery; the Asian church will sing not one but a thousand new canticles to its Spouse and Lord."<sup>178</sup> Secondly, that "non-Christian sages be encouraged to tell *their own* story of Jesus."<sup>179</sup> As mentioned earlier, he holds that followers of other religions, who are sincere in their religious practice and concerned with the lot of the poor, will have important insights into the person and message of Jesus. Asia, therefore, presents theology with unique and exciting resources, present in its multireligious and social makeup, upon which to understand the significance of Jesus Christ anew.

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<sup>175</sup> Pieris, "Whither the New Evangelism?" 148.

<sup>176</sup> Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism," 134.

<sup>177</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Speaking of the Son of God in Non-Christian Cultures" [First published in *Concilium* 153 (1982)], in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 63-64.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



## ***Liberation, the Foundation of an Asian Theology of Religions***

Pieris has become dissatisfied with the preoccupation of many theologians, especially in the West, to find an academic and philosophical solution to the theology of religions. Such an exercise is seen as of limited value in the Asian context. Instead, he has concentrated on exploring a new way of viewing the issue and a new approach to tackling it. He recalled how he gets embarrassed when asked into which category he fits – exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist.<sup>180</sup> These for him reflect Western cultural classifications, developed in a philosophical atmosphere and with an apologetical concern for the uniqueness of Jesus. In the West, he complained, dialogue is “an academical luxury” while in the East “inter-faith encounter with all its psycho-sociological tensions constitutes a day-to-day experience.”<sup>181</sup> A theology of religions in Asia, then, cannot be decided on purely academic grounds but, in his view, must encompass the whole of life. While he understood the academic quest for understanding in this area to be legitimate, he saw it as not the only or most fruitful way.

A new approach to the theology of religions gradually took shape in his writings, with the emphasis moving from academic speculation to praxis and in-depth dialogue. In an early article he spoke of how liturgical practice prefigured theological development and how experimenting with scriptures and symbols from Asian religions in the Mass would eventually lead to new theological expression.<sup>182</sup> Praxis needed to come before theory. A few years later, in criticising the ‘fulfilment theory’ of religions, he first employed the image of baptism as a model for approaching other religions, which he was later to develop in the theme of Jesus’ double baptism. Asia’s religions, he argued back then, do not need to be baptised by Christianity in order to fulfil their potential. Rather, he suggested that:

The local Church also dip into the waters of Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. and emerge with a clear manifestation of her messianic awareness – as was the case with her Founder when he was baptized by the Precursor.”<sup>183</sup>

The implication is that the practice of dialogue, where the Christian seeks an in-depth appreciation of the other’s religious tradition, precedes the theological formulation of

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<sup>180</sup> Pieris, “Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions,” 155-156.

<sup>181</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Legitimacy and the Limitations of the Academic Approach to Inter-Faith Dialogue,” *Dialogue* n.s. 1, no. 2 (1974): 39. Pieris speaks of three elements in the theology of religions that characterise the western approach: an academic and philosophical approach; apologetical use of non-Christian thought in favour of Christianity; and the “power-consciousness” of the Church. Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 23.

<sup>182</sup> Pieris, “Liturgy and Dialogue with Buddhism,” 3.

<sup>183</sup> Pieris, “The Church, the Kingdom and Other Religions,” 5.

the relationship between the two religions. Pieris later developed this into the 'participatory approach' where study of the other leads to practice within its religious traditions, before resulting in new theological insights. In this process, rather than concentrating on developing all-embracing theological formula that prejudge other religions before dialogue takes place, the Christian enters into dialogue with an openness to discover the liberative message of the other's religion which acts to shape their theological understanding. There is, though, a precondition to dialogue set by Pieris, which is demanded by the Asian context and his Christian faith. This is a commitment to liberation, and within this to an identification with the poor. "Any genuine theology," Pieris warned, must take account of the "story of Jesus," which is "preeminently the story of a God *of* the poor, a God *with* the poor, a God *for* the poor."<sup>184</sup>

The foundation of a new theology of religions in Asia then, argued Pieris, must be liberation rather than theological speculation. This accords with his understanding of the biblical witness, which is concerned primarily with liberation expressed in terms of the two biblical axioms. The Western theological predilection for metaphysical discussion about the uniqueness of Christ, he charged, is unproductive in Asia. It serves only to put forward the Christian God as "one of many competing cosmic forces" in the Asian pantheon, where the liberative thrust of Jesus' ministry becomes lost in ontological arguments about his person and being.<sup>185</sup> Placing a commitment to liberation at the centre of a theology of religions is also more suited to Asia since, according to Pieris, liberation is the central concern of Asia's religions. 'God-talk' is therefore not the only basis of dialogue; in Asia, he says, "Soteriology is the foundation of theology."<sup>186</sup> An Asian theology of religions will, he argued, be shaped by three overlapping factors found lacking in the West. First, there is recognition of the God-given role of the poor to reveal divine love and justice. Second, there is an appreciation of the concern for liberation lying at the heart of Asia's religions, which provides the basis for dialogue. Third are the basic human communities, where a new theology of religions begins to emerge out of a quest for liberation together with the poor and their religious traditions.

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<sup>184</sup> Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures," 94.

<sup>185</sup> Pieris, "Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," 160.

<sup>186</sup> Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures," 107.

## **'Symbiosis,' An Asian Approach**

By the late 1980s Pieris was describing his dialogical approach to the theology of religions as "symbiosis."<sup>187</sup> Behind this approach, which he described as an "Asian paradigm,"<sup>188</sup> appears to lie an important theological presupposition. He stated that no "language of the spirit," as he sometimes calls religions, is superior to another and "no language, not even the Christian one, exhausts the totality of the Spirit's liberative self-communication."<sup>189</sup> A basic openness to liberative truth discoverable in the other's religious tradition is thus required in dialogue. He argued that symbiosis is distinct from syncretism and synthesis. The last two approaches tend to confuse or discard the unique identities of religious traditions. He described the Asian approach:

Our option is for "symbiosis," a cultivated form of reciprocal proexistence whereby each idiom [religion] sharpens its identity in conversation with the other. For their mutual exposure reveals the authentic character of each in such a way that it is possible to recognize that which is not genuine in each of them. Hence the most significant outcome of the symbiotic approach is the discovery and the consequent elimination of that which is spurious in each tradition.<sup>190</sup>

According to Pieris, each religion in this process acts as a judgement upon the other in dialogue, encouraging clarification, not confusion, of religious identity. However, in the process of relating in a common search for liberation, each religion comes to appreciate and learn from the teachings and practices of the others. A symbiotic relationship thus develops that respects and clarifies religious differences but also enables mutual enrichment to occur as religions are exposed to each other's liberative teachings and practices.<sup>191</sup>

Such symbiosis, believes Pieris, is what takes place in the basic human communities. But it is their common commitment to helping the poor, not a desire for interreligious dialogue per se, which prompts a deeper sharing of religious experience and understanding of beliefs. This enables the Christian to appreciate the other religion not simply as a set of doctrines or particular practices but as a liberative force in society, and to appropriate these liberative elements into Christian praxis and theology. Pieris is adamant that this will not result in a loss or relativising

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<sup>187</sup> Pieris, "Faith Communities and Communalism," 101.

<sup>188</sup> Pieris, "Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," 161.

<sup>189</sup> Pieris, "Faith Communities and Communalism," 102.

<sup>190</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Ignatian Exercises Against a Buddhist Background" [First published in *The Way Supplement* 68 (1990)], in *Fire and Water*, 184.

<sup>191</sup> Pieris maintains that the liberative potential of cosmic religiosity and secular ideologies like Marxism and feminism must also be incorporated within the dialogue process.

of Christian identity. It is for him a surer means, within the rich plurality of Asia, of discovering Christian identity and sharing it with others; far better than previous efforts at sharing the gospel based on claims to exclusive truth. He described what happens in basic human communities (BHCs):

It is within the process of this ongoing liberative praxis that each member of the BHC discovers the uniqueness of his or her religion. My religious identity is not something I seek and find through academic discussion; it is something that the other religionists impart to me. It is the process of naming and recognizing both sin and liberation as experienced and acted upon by us in a BHC that we acquire for one another our respective religious uniqueness.<sup>192</sup>

Symbiosis will, he believes, lead to new theological expressions concerning the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. It is something, however, still in the making, which Asian Christians need time and theological freedom to pursue.

Rather than trying to define the relationship between Christ and other religions on a philosophical and theological level, then, which has so far failed to impress the Asian mind, Pieris points to the primacy of praxis as the Christian and Asian way forward. Christology and theology of religions are not viewed as being some kind of universal doctrines from the West that await inculturation in Asia. They are to be discovered through a process of Christian discipleship that involves identifying with the poor and dialogue with the liberative spirituality of Asian religions. Liberation, not doctrine, is the proper focus of concern. A theology of religions will in a sense, therefore, be a by-product of the quest for liberation. What he provides is not so much a theology of religions as a model of dialogue, symbiosis, which in time promises to produce more definite theological expressions.

### ***Christian Love and Buddhist Wisdom, In Need of Each Other***

Through various historical studies Pieris shows that the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity is a very old and at times surprisingly close one. He refers to the Nestorian Christians of the early centuries in Central Asia and China who sought to incorporate Buddhist terminology and the *bodhisattva* ideal into developing a "Buddhist christology."<sup>193</sup> He is doubtful, though, if this intellectually sophisticated christology would have made much sense to the Chinese masses, who must have been more concerned with their daily needs than such theological speculations. In another article he pointed out how the Buddha was actually revered,

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<sup>192</sup> Pieris, "Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," 158.

<sup>193</sup> Pieris, "Does Christ Have a Place in Asia?" 36.

albeit incognito, as a Christian saint in medieval times. Scholarship revealed that one of the most popular medieval saints, St. Joasaph (or St. Barlaam and Joasaph), who was revered for his asceticism and mystical insight, was in actual fact the Buddha. As the story of the Buddha crossed geographical, cultural and linguistic borders from East to West his name was corrupted and he took on the persona of this Christian saint. Pieris remarked that at the same time as the first European discoverer of the Buddha, the Franciscan William of Rubruck (b. c. 1215 - d. after 1256), was describing the Mongolian worshippers of the Buddha as idolaters, "The church's *theopraxis* had appropriated what its *theology* repudiated: the gnosis-orientated spirituality of the East" through its worship of St. Joasaph.<sup>194</sup> A relationship between the two religions then, Pieris reported, has existed since early times. However, he is also aware that the predominant relationship fostered mainly by Western Christian missions has been one of distrust and hostility.

Dialogue is often impossible between Christians and Buddhists, contended Pieris, because of a basic failure to understand the idiomatic language that each religion uses. Buddhism, he explained, uses a *gnostic* idiom to express its teachings and the experience of salvation, whereas Christianity uses an *agapeic* idiom. To interpret one idiom through the eyes of the other without prior understanding of its peculiar usage is to invite misunderstanding. This is not helped, he pointed out, by the anti-gnostic bias that has been a feature of Western and Christian thought since the early centuries.<sup>195</sup> He explained that the language of love, the Christian idiom, influences the whole self-understanding and self-expression of Christian faith. God is conceived of as a loving Father, salvation is seen as being redeemed by the love of God in communion with God and one another, and discipleship is understood in terms of self-giving love symbolised by the cross. Buddhism on the other hand, through its 'wisdom' idiom, conceives of *nirvana* as ineffable and non-personal, of salvation as a liberating knowledge that takes place in the mind, and discipleship as based on morality and the development of meditative insight. As knowledge of God

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<sup>194</sup> Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism," 26. For reference to William of Rubruck see "William Rubruck," *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1 page [encyclopaedia on-line]; available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13217a.htm>; Internet; accessed 7 August 2000. For a detailed description of how the story of the Buddha became that of Joasaph see Graeme MacQueen, "Changing Master Narratives in Midstream: *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the growth of Religious Intolerance in the Buddhalegend's Westward Journey," *JBE* 5 (1998): 144-166 [journal on-line]; available from <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/5/macqn981.pdf>; Internet; accessed 26 July 1999. MacQueen notes that the story was most popular in the period from the 11<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>195</sup> Pieris detects this anti-gnostic bias behind Max Weber's influential caricature of Buddhism as an otherworldly religion unconcerned with social realities. Pieris, "Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians," 62.



is understood to come through a relationship of love in Christianity, in Buddhism the opposite appears true; love (*karuna*) is viewed as the result of wisdom.

Pieris argued that both languages of *gnosis* and *agape* were required for the development of a holistic spirituality. He does not view them as primarily representing geographical poles (the detached East confronting the emotional West) but as two poles of the human spirit, both necessary to express and experience salvation. It is important therefore for Christians to appreciate and learn from the *gnostic* idiom of Buddhism. He wrote:

A genuine Christian experience of God-in-Christ grows by maintaining a dialectical tension between two poles: between action and nonaction, between word and silence, between control of nature and harmony with nature, between self-affirmation and self-negation, between engagement and withdrawal, between love and knowledge, between *karuna* and *prajñā*, between *agape* and *gnosis*.<sup>196</sup>

Buddhist spirituality is characterised by the list of second elements in the above quotation of dual requirements. Buddhism also, stated Pieris, can likewise learn to appreciate the positive aspects of an *agapeic* spirituality represented in the first elements. He suggested that it should be possible for Buddhists to understand *nirvana* - classically defined in Buddhist terms as the overcoming of *raga*, *dosa* and *moha*— afresh in *agapeic* terms. *Nirvana* could then, he argued, be “affirmed in terms of ‘love’ experienced within the context of perfect ‘knowing’”; where *araga* (greedlessness) is understood as “unselfish love” and *adosa* (hatelessness) as “forgiving love,” existing within the context of a liberative knowledge (*amoha*, undeludedness).<sup>197</sup> Seen in this way, Buddhism and Christianity represent two religious models “incomplete each in itself,” but which together can be “complementary and *mutually corrective*.”<sup>198</sup>

Yet, while acknowledging that both religions are “languages of the Spirit”<sup>199</sup> that contribute to the total knowledge of God and enrich each other, Pieris also affirmed that real differences between the two religions exist and must be respected. He explained that these differences “are understandable in terms of two languages, though not reducible to them.”<sup>200</sup> Hence he does not see points of similarity, such as God and *nirvana* or prayer and meditation, as simple “equivalents” but as

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<sup>196</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 27.

<sup>197</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 117.

<sup>198</sup> Pieris, “Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism,” 27.

<sup>199</sup> Pieris, “Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians,” 62.

<sup>200</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Idiomatic Differences between Buddhism and Christianity,” *Dialogue* n.s. 22 (1995): 124.

“homologues.”<sup>201</sup> That is, they fulfil a similar function and correspond to each other but they are not necessarily the same in essence.

### ***Jesus and the Buddha***

The ontological relationship between Jesus and the Buddha is not speculated upon by Pieris in any kind of philosophical treatise, but it is recognised as a burning issue to which he advocates his own particular praxis-oriented solution. He noted that Buddhism and Christianity are uncommonly similar in attaching soteriological significance to the historical person of their respective founders. The Buddha, in the Theravada tradition, is not presented as incarnate God but as a ‘pathfinder’ of the truth. Yet his supramundane nature and the worship accorded him, stated Pieris, “implies a *truly transcendent* dimension of a *truly human* being.”<sup>202</sup> Buddhism, thus, presents a particular challenge to christology, more so than other religions, by the emphasis it places on the unique nature of the Buddha’s person.

In Buddhism, as in Christianity, Pieris pointed out there can be found philosophies that approximate to the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist positions in the theology of religions. He referred, for example, to the Buddhist use of Pacceka-Buddha to explain how non-Buddhists can attain *nirvana*.<sup>203</sup> This, he said, is a concept that is similar to the ‘anonymous Christianity’ of Karl Rahner. He supported such attempts by Buddhists to interpret Jesus using their own Buddhist categories. This was recognised as an important exercise because, he wrote:

Jesus is not the monopoly of Christians, just as the Buddha is not the exclusive inheritance of Buddhists. Each is a gift to all.<sup>204</sup>

Important as these efforts are, he stressed that Buddhists and Christians must seek to understand each other’s religion not simply through the lens of their own theological or philosophical resources but by entering into the self-understanding of the other. Moreover, he warned that such ontological and soteriological formulae used by both Christians and Buddhists led only to claims of superiority of one religion over the other even when couched in inclusivist language. He advocated

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 128.

<sup>203</sup> Pieris, “The One Path,” 1-2. A Pacceka-Buddha, ‘Independently Enlightened One,’ is a person who realises *nirvana* without having heard the Buddha’s teachings. However, the realisation of *nirvana* is based on the same doctrines of the Four Noble Truths. A Pacceka-Buddha does not have the same ability to teach others effectively as a Buddha like Sakyamuni.

<sup>204</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Whence Comes the Authority to Teach Religion?” *Dialogue* n.s. 17, nos. 1-3 (1990): ii.

instead “a new ‘liberational’ approach”<sup>205</sup> to christology, one that grew out of his dialogue with Buddhism, that would complement rather than undermine buddhology. This is based on the two biblical axioms, the symbol of which he said is Jesus on the cross - expressing Jesus’ twofold ascesis of non-attachment to the world and struggle for justice. This constitutes a “salvific path” as well as a christological formula in Pieris’ view.<sup>206</sup> He wrote that it:

Does not compete with buddhology but complements it by acknowledging the one path of liberation on which Christians join Buddhists in their *gnostic detachment* (or the practice of voluntary poverty) and Buddhists join Christians in their *agapeic involvement* in the struggle against forced poverty.<sup>207</sup>

Liberation rather than ontology, praxis rather than philosophical debate, become the focus of Pieris’ christology, a christology that, he believes, enables Christians and Buddhists to work together for the good of humankind, instead of being divisive and competing forces in society.

As outlined earlier, interactions with Buddhists have led Pieris to declare that they can have penetrating insights into the person and message of Jesus from within their own tradition. Such Buddhist reflections have encouraged him to view the person of Jesus in a new light and also clarified the uniqueness of the Christian religion as the covenant of God with the poor.<sup>208</sup> This points to a common source of religious truth in Buddhist-Christian spirituality that he refers to as the “Universal Word,”<sup>209</sup> but to which Buddhists have been sensitised through their own tradition. Thus, he advocated the need for Christians to listen to the reflections of Buddhists on Jesus in order to arrive at a more complete Asian christology. He counselled again, however, that such reflection should arise out of a living spirituality that finds its focus in the two-pronged fight against interior selfishness and social injustice. In the basic human communities this living spirituality is shared among Buddhists and Christians. He described what happens:

Here, co-pilgrims expound their respective scriptures, retelling the story of Jesus and Gautama in a core-to-core dialogue that makes their hearts burn (Luke 24:32). It is only at the end of the path, as at

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<sup>205</sup> Pieris, “Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians,” 65.

<sup>206</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), 174.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>208</sup> Pieris, “Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions,” 159.

<sup>209</sup> Pieris, “Inculturation in Asia,” 137.

Emmaus, that the path itself will be recognized by name (Luke 24:31).<sup>210</sup>

Whether that final name is Jesus Christ or not seems to be of secondary importance to Pieris. What is important, for Christians and Buddhists alike, is following the path their founders have taught and lived. In doing so both will contribute to liberation, as well as find mutual encouragement and encounter theological/philosophical challenges along the way. A comprehensive understanding of how the Buddha and Jesus relate is not yet possible; or at least he does not speculate on it, since the proper religious concern of both, as he understands them, was not with such speculations but with liberation.

### ***A Symbiosis between Christianity and Buddhism***

The concern to discover such a liberating praxis in Asia has led Pieris into an in-depth encounter with Buddhism. Symbiosis is a term that accurately describes his relationship with Buddhism. On the one hand, he has sought to explain the unique character of Buddhist teachings that present a completely different view of reality from the Christian one. This is seen most clearly in his careful exposition of Buddhist doctrines and his reluctance to simply equate Buddhist teachings with Christian ones, or to interpret them theologically in a way that Buddhists would not recognise. On the other hand, his writings provide ample evidence of an assimilation of Buddhist insights and practices into his own life and theology. The Buddhist way of voluntary poverty appears to be one of the most important elements that he has learned from. It has led him to appreciate the need for interior detachment and self-analysis, and fed into his christological reflections concerning the two biblical axioms. In many articles he points to the significance of this spirituality for the development of an Asian theology of liberation. Christianity and Buddhism meet here in a common concern to develop the selfless person freed from the temptations of mammon. However, it is in Buddhism that this aspect of religious life has been most cultivated and emphasised, and from which Christians can humbly learn.

One of the most important Buddhist elements that Pieris has assimilated is, as already noted, silence. This has had a purifying and enriching effect on his theology and Christian practice. In an early article he spoke of how the Buddha's response of silence when asked to describe *nirvana* impressed him. Such silence challenged the Christian to avoid attaching ultimate authority to theological formulas and pietistic

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<sup>210</sup> Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation," 175.

beliefs about God.<sup>211</sup> The Buddha's silence, he wrote, reminds theology that all words have "*Silence as their Source and Destiny.*"<sup>212</sup> It points to the ineffable nature of God, beyond all theology. Silence is not only a philosophical response in Buddhism but also a central aspect of its practice expressed in meditation and introspective analysis, and found in such qualities as inner harmony and equanimity favoured by Buddhists. Pieris has integrated such practices into his own life, particularly evident in his celebrations of the Mass in Manila. In the liturgy he has incorporated elements of Buddhist meditation and mindfulness training, most clearly seen in his appropriation of the *metta bhavana* ('meditation on loving-kindness') that he includes in the act of reconciliation. The whole Mass is imbued with a Buddhist atmosphere that emphasises silence as the basis for proclaiming and understanding the word of God.<sup>213</sup> He affirmed that such usage of Buddhist techniques and teachings in his later years "is certainly not an *experiment* with the Liturgy, but an *experience* of the Trinity."<sup>214</sup>

In a recent article Pieris gave more evidence of his symbiotic relationship with Buddhism by providing a glimpse of how his immersion in Buddhism has challenged and complemented his own Ignatian spirituality and theology. He described Ignatius of Loyola's theological expression in the *Spiritual Exercises* as heavily influenced by scholasticism, resulting in a strong rationalist and dogmatic tone where the world is seen as a mere instrument to support one's desire to know God.<sup>215</sup> This, he noted, is "the polar opposite of the ecological approach of the Buddhists"<sup>216</sup> that derives from a therapeutic methodology evident in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha is presented therein as a compassionate physician who brings healing to the world.<sup>217</sup> Buddhism, then, presents a challenge to the kind of Christian theology that expresses the relationship between God and humanity in stark doctrinal terms, such as that of guilt and justification. He explained that "this critical observation was inspired by my Buddhist experience."<sup>218</sup> This encouraged him to look for an alternative theological approach in the history of Christianity, and he found a

<sup>211</sup> Pieris, "The Church, the Kingdom and Other Religions," 7.

<sup>212</sup> Pieris, "Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation," 49.

<sup>213</sup> Pieris, "A Liturgical Anticipation," 69-82. *Bhavana* is the Pali word that is translated as meditation in English. It literally means 'to become,' 'to produce' or 'call into being.' A description of the *metta bhavana* can be found in Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 80-81.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>215</sup> Pieris notes that this theology was at odds with the spirituality of Ignatius' 'Spiritual Exercises,' which emphasised affective knowledge and praxis.

<sup>216</sup> Pieris, "Ignatian Exercises Against a Buddhist Background," 185.

<sup>217</sup> For a brief description of the Buddha as physician, from a Buddhist point of view, see Rewata Dhamma "What I Expect of Friendship with Christians," *Current Dialogue* 30 (1996): 30-31.

<sup>218</sup> Pieris, "Ignatian Exercises Against a Buddhist Background," 187.



comparative therapeutic model in some Church Fathers and among some early Benedictines. In the same article Pieris compared the Ignatian understanding of contemplation with the Theravada practice of *sati-patthana* (mindfulness). He found that both practices revealed a spirituality of self-denial as lying at the heart of each religion. This led him to criticise Christian traditions that tend to see contemplation as the focus and goal of religious life, resulting in an elitist spirituality that has little to do with self-denial. He also used it to challenge aspects of modern theology: liberal theology, when it places an over-emphasis on the individual; feminist theology, when it is in danger of over-stressing self-assertiveness; and liberation theology, when it fails to recognise the need for self-analysis as well as social-analysis.<sup>219</sup> Further, in this article, he spoke of how the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* challenged his christology. It encouraged him to reflect more on the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Jesus and its implications for discipleship. While not abandoning belief in God, as the doctrine of *anatta* would require, Pieris emphasised the self-emptying of Jesus in sheer obedience to the will of God that leads to his passion. He then used the Buddhist term *sunyata* (*sunyata*, emptiness/voidness), associated with *anatta*, to speak of how Jesus is revealed to those who follow him “on the *suññatā* (*kenosis*) of the cross.”<sup>220</sup> Discipleship here is portrayed as a process of self-emptying, of utter humility, in order to be filled by God’s will in service to other people.

The effect of a symbiotic relationship is clearly evident, then, through Buddhism’s influence on Pieris. As described above it has encouraged him to a deeper exploration of the Christian tradition, acted as a purifying critique of dangerous trends in theology, and enabled the use of new terms to describe the ministry of Jesus and explore the meaning of discipleship. Symbiosis is presented as a process that encourages a deepening of faith and theological reflection.

Buddhist terminology is used by Pieris in many other articles to give expression to his theological ideas. As a Sinhala Christian it is not surprising he should employ terms that have been taken from his mother tongue influenced by Buddhism. Yet, the reader senses that it is not only the unavoidable use of Buddhist language to communicate Christian truths that he is engaged in, but also the appropriation of certain Buddhist self-understandings within the language. For example, his use of the terms ‘cosmic’ (primal religions) and ‘metacosmic’ (world religions) to describe two levels of religiosity in Asia is derived from a Buddhist understanding of religious experience, consisting of *lokiya* (mundane) and *lokuttara*

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 191-192.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 194.

(supramundane).<sup>221</sup> This enables him to speak of liberation as being “the *cosmic experience of the metacosmic*” within human experience.<sup>222</sup> Also, the concept of voluntary poverty that he develops is dependent on a Buddhist understanding.<sup>223</sup> His use of silence to describe the Godhead and speak of the “Silence of the Asian Christ” in his identification with the suffering of the Asian poor is further inspired by Buddhism.<sup>224</sup> The full extent of this Buddhist influence on his Christian expression is impossible to gauge, since his works are written in English and he rarely speaks directly about it, but from the examples given and the way in which he moves easily between linking Buddhist and Christian terms it can be surmised that the influence is substantial.

From the above outline of Pieris’ symbiotic relationship with Buddhism it is clear that Buddhism has deeply influenced his life and theology on many levels. It has not, however, led to a clear philosophical exposition on the ontological relationship between Jesus and the Buddha or God and the *Dhamma*. He does speak of “discovering the Word in Buddhism,”<sup>225</sup> reminiscent of early articles that spoke of the anonymous presence of Christ in other religions, but he also relates how Buddhist self-analysis has led him to “accepting and discovering God in a new dimension.”<sup>226</sup> He does not, however, fashion these statements into a comprehensive theology of religions. His aim is rather to draw the reader’s attention away from ontological models, and lead them to reconsider the meaning of salvation when Christians and Buddhists engage in dialogue for the purpose of seeking liberation. When this happens, knowledge of the name in which salvation is offered seems not to be as important as “knowledge of the path,”<sup>227</sup> the way of greedless living and commitment to the poor that brings liberation. Buddhism is considered to be salvific not because Jesus Christ makes it so, but because its teachings bring about “a *self-transcending* event that radically transforms the human person,”<sup>228</sup> witnessing to an interior experience of liberation. In the end, Pieris claims it is not confessional statements or declarations of Christ’s uniqueness that communicate salvation. Rather,

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<sup>221</sup> Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 33.

<sup>222</sup> Pieris, “Woman and Religion in Asia,” 179.

<sup>223</sup> Pieris, “Monastic Poverty in the Asian Setting,” 104, 112. A detailed explanation of how poverty is understood in Theravada Buddhism can be found in Mavis Fenn, “Two Notions of Poverty in the Pali Canon,” *JBE* 3 (1996): 98-125 [journal on-line]; available from <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/3/fenn1.html>; Internet; accessed 1 April 1998.

<sup>224</sup> Pieris, “A Liturgical Anticipation,” 74.

<sup>225</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Inculturation in Asia,” 120.

<sup>226</sup> Pieris, “Two Encounters,” 145.

<sup>227</sup> Pieris, “Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism,” 133. Pieris refers to Matthew 25.31-46 to support this assertion.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

“Liberation is the only proof of liberation!”<sup>229</sup> To speak of the lordship of Christ to Buddhists is only meaningful, therefore, when it is a lived reality in the present through a self-effacing discipleship of interior humility and identification with the poor.<sup>230</sup> Buddhists will then not view Christianity as a threat to their religion but rather as a call to a deeper commitment to their own teachings on liberation.

The influence of Pieris’ dialogue with Buddhism on his approach to the theology of religions has, then, been immense. He clearly recognised the theological challenge presented to christology by the significance that Buddhists accord to the person of the Buddha and admitted that there are great differences in basic beliefs. However, he also perceived the possibility for mutual enrichment between the two religions, with Buddhists and Christians learning from the different emphasis each placed on love and wisdom. In order to meet the Buddhist challenge to christology within the Asian context, and indeed that of all other religions, he developed his ‘liberational christology.’ This recognises that Buddhism can help Christians to develop their understanding of voluntary poverty whilst encouraging Buddhists to discover a deeper commitment to identifying with the needs of the poor. His dialogue with Buddhism has also introduced the approach of symbiosis into debates about the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. In many and various ways he shows that such an approach can be a purifying and enriching experience that provides new tools for theological thought and Christian practice, while enabling respect for religious differences to be maintained. In the end though, what is important in the theology of religions is not the development of a new theory of relationship between the religions. As his own dialogue with Buddhism and that of the basic human communities testifies, a joint commitment to liberation, which is seen to reflect the primary concern of both Jesus and Buddha, is the foundation and goal of dialogue and the theology of religions.

### 5.3 Summary of the Dialogue with Buddhism

Dialogue with Buddhism lies at the heart of Pieris’ personal life, theological writings, and social commitments. Since the 1970s he has engaged in an intense and wide-ranging dialogue where he has sought to enter into the self-understanding of Buddhism. Through this he has become a friend of Buddhists and is viewed as a

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>230</sup> Pieris, “Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians,” 65.

trusted interpreter of Buddhism. The influence of dialogue on his theological reflections is seen clearly in how it has contributed to his theology of liberation. His personal experience of immersion in the Buddhist religion has convinced him of the need for interreligious dialogue to be seen as an integral part of an Asian liberation theology. From Buddhism he has learned to appreciate a new theological method where theory is complemented and defined by praxis. The Buddhist concern for voluntary poverty has also fed into his understanding of what should constitute a theology of liberation, and the *Sangha* has been a source of inspiration in coming to envision the kind of society that such theology aims at creating.

Pieris has made it his personal mission to interpret Buddhism for Christians, and to defend it from their misinterpretation. Learning from Buddhist renunciation and the Buddhist social vision has also convinced him of the possibility of developing a common mission in Asia, one directed against the forces of mammon in its many forms and whose goal is the evolution of greedless individuals and just societies. Interreligious dialogue and a commitment to liberation are seen as the two cornerstones of the church's missionary endeavour in Asia. This mission is to be non-proselytising, wherein Christians encourage Buddhists to offer their reflections on the significance of Jesus so that the church might also have a deeper understanding of him.

Finally, the dialogue with Buddhism has been of significance in developing Pieris' critique of the Western theology of religions and his own reflections on the subject. He clearly admits that great differences exist between Buddhism and Christianity in beliefs and practices. However, as his study of their idiomatic languages argued, he sees the two religions as basically complementary in their spiritual approach. He does not set about a philosophical discussion on how the relationship between Jesus and the Buddha is to be understood in ontological terms. He pleads with the reader to move away from metaphysical arguments about the 'uniqueness' of Jesus and to recognise the value of a liberation christology for Asia. Such a christology stresses the common and complementary concerns of both the Buddha and Jesus in their desire to overcome mammon and to relieve humanity's suffering through identification with the injustices of the poor. It is a praxis-orientated approach to liberation, rather than philosophical theory, which takes centre stage in Pieris' theology of religions. This is seen in his emphasis on symbiosis as a method for developing a theology of religions, through an in-depth encounter with Buddhist spirituality and appropriation of its liberative teachings. It is a process which enables Buddhists and Christians to learn each other's liberative ethos, whilst

respecting the different doctrinal and religious practices that remain. He himself, and the basic human communities he supports, bear testimony to such a praxis-oriented and dialogical approach.



### **Part III**

#### **The Three Asian Theologians: An Assessment**

## Chapter 6

# **The Dialogue with Buddhism and Emerging Theological Issues and Challenges: A Critical Engagement**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter is divided into two main sections, 6.2 and 6.3, the most important of which is the latter section. In section 6.2, I provide a critical and comparative assessment of the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. It begins with an individual study of each theologian, providing a description of the theological framework within which dialogue takes place and noting the significance of the dialogue for his work. A critique of each theologian's engagement with Buddhism, in relation to his theological concerns, is also given. The section ends with a comparative assessment of the three theologians.

Section 6.3, which forms the major part of this chapter, engages critically with the theological issues and challenges that have emerged from the theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. Three broad areas of theological concern have been discerned: the interreligious aspect of Asian Christian identity, theology in the Asian context, and Asian liberation theology. Within these three concerns, central theological issues are highlighted and debated: the interreligious formation of Asian Christians; the role of context as a *locus theologicus* (i.e., as a source and basis for theological work); a theological method involving an immersion in the socio-religious context of Asia; the understanding of mission; Asian critiques of Western theology; the understanding of Jesus in relation to other religions; and the role of liberation and praxis in interreligious dialogue and theological development. These theological issues, crucial in both the fields of interreligious dialogue and general theological reflection, are considered in detail as I develop my own assessment of the three theologians' work.

## 6.2 A Critique of the Dialogue with Buddhism

### 6.2.1 Kosuke Koyama

The theological framework within which Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism has taken place finds its focus in a theology of the cross. As described earlier, in this theology there is an emphasis on the involved and costly nature of God's love for humanity, and on Christian discipleship built upon humility and an active socio-ethical concern. The development of this theological framework has in large part been influenced through his personal encounters with the socio-political, cultural, and religious realities of Asia. He has adopted a dialogical approach that has enabled him to be both critical and appreciative of different aspects of these Asian realities. His theology can thus be described as one that develops through encounter, where there is a stress on the need for Christians to engage with the theologically unfamiliar and challenging aspects of the Asian context.<sup>1</sup>

Koyama's dialogical approach can be seen in his engagement with Buddhism, which began with a recognition of the religious value of Thai Buddhist spirituality and culture, and caused him to develop a concern for contextualisation of the Christian faith in Asia. His exposure to Buddhism also changed his theology of religions, led him to incorporate Buddhist insights into his Christian theology and life, and encouraged him to look more deeply into interreligious influences upon Asian Christian life and religious identity. However, there has always been a critical dimension to the dialogue in which he has engaged. He has not shied away from confronting religious differences between Christianity and Buddhism, and dialogue has been carried out within his overarching theological framework revolving around the crucified Christ.

Some criticisms can be made of Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism as it relates to his theological concerns. There are significant omissions. One of these is his lack of reflection on the central role played by meditation in Buddhism. This is unexpected given his exposure to Buddhist monasticism and teachings. There are a few places in his writings where mention is made of the importance of meditation for Buddhists, but he fails to develop these references or to connect them with the Buddhist simplicity of life and greedless living that so impressed him. His lack of reflection in this area hampers a deeper discussion on issues surrounding the

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<sup>1</sup> This is in agreement with Merrill Morse's assessment of the nature of Koyama's theological development. Morse, *Kosuke Koyama*, 1-13.

possibility of what he called a 'Christian interreligious spirituality' in the Asian context.

Another omission in Koyama's approach relates to discussion on the status and role of women in Buddhism. Though he is not dismissive of the feminist critique of religions it is not brought into his dialogue with Buddhism. In general, the status of women in both Thai and Japanese Buddhism can be said to be below that of men. In Thailand, increasing numbers of educated women have taken to meditation practice and *Dhamma* teaching in recent years, but the ordination of women as nuns is not supported by monks of the Thai *Sangha*. The religious role of most women is restricted to being lay supporters of the monastic order or belonging to a small group of women called *mae chis* who seek to lead a life based on basic Buddhist precepts. *Mae chis* are not officially recognised and do not receive the veneration given to monks.<sup>2</sup> The formal status of women in Japanese Buddhism is somewhat better, especially in many of the new religious movements that developed in the twentieth century. Though there are ordained nuns in Japan they are for the most part, however, still considered subordinate to their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Koyama does not reflect on the obvious inequalities that exist or on movements within Buddhism to address them.<sup>4</sup> This reveals a general weakness in his theological discourse: despite his concern for socio-ethical matters, the oppression of women in Asia fails to receive proper attention.

A further weakness can be found in his lack of regard for developments in Thai Buddhism that are crucial for understanding debates about the role of Buddhism in the present time of rapid economic and social change. He makes no reference, for example, to the movement of Engaged Buddhism or, on the other hand, to concerns within Thailand about the moral standing of the *Sangha* with monks having been accused of bringing Buddhism into disrepute through financial and sexual scandals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The word *mae chi* is often translated as nun, but *mae chis* in Thailand are not given the same kind of respect or official recognition that Catholic nuns receive in their church. A more literal translation of *mae chi* would be 'female ascetic.' For a discussion of the role of women in Thai Buddhism and efforts to establish an order of nuns see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "The Future of the Bhikkhuni Samgha in Thailand," in *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1986), 139-148.

<sup>3</sup> For reference to women in Japanese Buddhism see Barnes, "Women in Buddhism," 149.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of Japanese nuns seeking to assert religious equality with monks see, Kumiko Uchino, "The Status Elevation Process of Sōtō Sect Nuns in Modern Japan," in *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1986), 149-163.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Sanitsuda Ekachai, "Monks are the Enemy Within," *Bangkok Post*, 16 July 1998 [newspaper on-line]; available from [http://www.Bangkokpost.com/today/160798\\_News22.html](http://www.Bangkokpost.com/today/160798_News22.html); Internet; accessed 16 July 1998.

Koyama's presentation of Thai Buddhism, especially by his many references to the impressive witness of the poverty and self-denial of monks, can appear somewhat dated and eirenic, failing to take into account the modern crisis and struggles for change within Thai Buddhism. In his defence it can be said that he has been living outside the Thai context for many years, but he continues to refer to his Thai experience as meaningful for his theology today. It can, therefore, be questioned if he presents Thai Buddhism in a sufficiently balanced fashion.

In a few aspects of Buddhist thought and practice that Koyama comments on there is a failure to take account of wider debates within Buddhism related to these areas. This can be seen in the contrast he draws between Theravada and Mahayana traditions in the field of social ethics. He draws attention to differences between the *arahant* and *bodhisattva* ideals, which leads him to portray Mahayana Buddhism as the more ethically orientated and socially active tradition. However, as his own appreciation of the Buddhist social concern in Thailand implies, the contrast in their ethical positions cannot be substantiated when a comparison is made between the two traditions' history of social involvement. Leading figures in Theravada Buddhism also challenge the notion that their teachings are not worldly orientated and cast doubts on how fundamental the contrast between the two traditions really is.<sup>6</sup> Inconsistencies in Koyama's treatment of Buddhist beliefs also open him to the criticism that he fails to appreciate the breadth of thought within Buddhism. For example, he portrays *nirvana* as a mysterious but largely passive and at times negative reality. The doctrine of *anatta* is similarly presented in a negative way and contrasted with the Christian sense of the self. These examples fail to acknowledge the plurality and richness of thought that exists in Buddhism on such key doctrinal issues. On the other hand, as his reflections on *sunyata* show, he does at times explore Buddhist doctrines in greater depth, positively relating them to Christian belief. The ambiguity that comes across in his treatment of Buddhist beliefs is perhaps simply a reflection of the uncertainty of meaning and speculative thought that surrounds dialogue on the doctrinal level. It is also the case that his more negative assessments of Buddhist thought belong to an earlier period of his writing. Nonetheless, greater acknowledgement of the complex nature of dialogue on this level would have helped. It would have been useful if he had highlighted the fact that

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Phra Rājavaramuni, "Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics," in *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics*, ed. Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 29-53. Questioning the supposed differences between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism in this area, and on doctrinal issues, is one of the main themes of Walpola Rahula, *Zen and the Taming of the Bull* (1978). Also, many of the leading figures in the movement of Engaged Buddhists come from the Theravada tradition.



within Buddhism, as in Christianity, there is a plurality of thought on doctrinal and ethical issues.<sup>7</sup> This would also have gone some way to explain the contrasting positions he found in Buddhist approaches to history.

Finally, the Asian theologian, Hwa Yung, makes a sustained criticism of Koyama's dialogue with Buddhism. He charges that Koyama neglects the popular religiosity of ordinary Buddhists.<sup>8</sup> In such popular Buddhism the primal religiosity of the people is often dominant. According to Yung, this primal religiosity reflects people's basic fears and aspirations, and is the main form of religion that confronts Christians in Asia at the grassroots level. He further claims that this aspect is neglected because Koyama is captive to a Western theological mindset that is interested only in the so-called 'higher' forms of religious thought found in the major world religions. There is some substance to Yung's criticism. In Koyama's reflections on 'kitchen theology,' for example, much is made of the interaction of Buddhist and Christian thought but little is said of the beliefs in *phi* (spirits), the power of amulets, astrology and other such things that underlie the primal religiosity of Thai Buddhists.<sup>9</sup> This appears, then, as a weakness in Koyama's theology and engagement with Thai Buddhism. He could be accused of presenting it in a better light than it deserves, of not recognising the influence that superstitious beliefs from people's primal religiosity has upon their worship of Buddhist images and religious rites. However, it is not as critical a shortcoming as Yung suggests. Koyama clearly takes the primal beliefs of Japanese people into account in his writings and speaks often of the cosmologically oriented beliefs of Asian peoples. In doing so he demonstrates an awareness of the role and dangers of primal religiosity.

Yung's critique is itself open to criticism. Unlike Yung, Koyama refers to positive elements within the primal religiosity of Asian people. This shows the potential for a more serious dialogue with folk Buddhism, recognising that there may be elements of spiritual worth within primal religiosity that Christians can learn from. It is a possibility ruled out by Yung, who appears to prejudge the primal religiosity of Asian people as being of little worth and thus stresses only its negative

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<sup>7</sup> Foster explores the plurality of beliefs that can be found within both Buddhist and Christian thought. Durwood Foster, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Current Sticking Points," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 151-182.

<sup>8</sup> Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, Regnum Studies in Mission Series (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997), 73, 167-168.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief study of how such beliefs are important for Thais of all educational and social backgrounds see Suntaree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioural Patterns* (Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration, 1990), 181-185. *Phi* is the Thai word for spirit(s) of which there are many kinds, some malevolent in nature, others offering protection and prosperity if treated with respect and offerings.

aspects. Yung is also in danger of making too neat a distinction between folk Buddhism and 'textual' or 'higher' Buddhism, seeing the folk aspects as more dominant. In Asian people's lives, aspects of both 'folk' and 'higher' Buddhism are deeply intertwined. In order to have a comprehensive interpretation of the Buddhist religion in Asia an engagement with both Buddhism in its classical forms and in its folk traditions is necessary.

### 6.2.2 Choan-Seng Song

Song's dialogue with Buddhism is principally related to his main theological concern to develop an authentic Asian theology. He seeks to do this through making use of Asian resources, in which Buddhism is a major influence. The theological underpinning for this exercise can be found in his belief that a God of love has created all people and has been working for their salvation through their social and religious development since the beginning of time. The theological task is, then, to discern God's presence in Asia and to incorporate the gathered insights into the reconstruction of theology. To this end, he advocates the use of imagination or intuitive insight to decode and unpack the theological significance that lies within the stories of Asia. The criteria for this discernment of God's presence in Asian stories are not stated in any formulaic way. He explains, though, that the imaginative or discerning power is developed through following the example of Jesus, who saw theological significance in the sufferings and longings of people's everyday lives and in the created order.<sup>10</sup> Within this theological framework Song draws lessons from Buddhist stories. They challenge the direction and focus of Asian theology, provide tools for new theological understanding and expression, and widen the vision of God's active presence in the world beyond the confines of Christianity.

Several criticisms can be made of Song's dialogue with Buddhism. Firstly, like Koyama, he largely ignores the meditative practices that are at the heart of Buddhist spirituality. One book reviewer commented that Song's lack of appreciation for Buddhist meditation led to an "unwarranted narrowness" in his presentation of Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in his use of Ch'an stories where he focuses on the theological and ethical challenges they present without any attempt to explore the meditative practices that are often central to them. This is also the case in the story of

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<sup>10</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 3, 17-18. For a study of Song's use of imagination in his theological method see Stephen Tso-Jen Chan, "The Theological Imagination of Choan-Seng Song; A Constructive Study of Christian Theology in Asia" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Charles MacCormick, review of *Third-Eye Theology*, by C. S. Song, *JES* 17, no. 1 (1980): 171.

his visit with some Korean theologians to the Zen monastery of Master Ku San. The story is told by Song to highlight the Master's failure to appreciate the theologians' concern for social justice, but the theologians can be accused of failing to appreciate the Master's references to non-dualism and the subtle workings of the mind, which arose out of his meditative insight. In Buddhism meditation is seen as a means to insight and a basis for developing compassion; Song neglects this crucial aspect.<sup>12</sup>

Another omission in Song's dialogue is an appreciation for the monastic structures that continue to govern the life of Buddhism in most places. He does refer to ways in which nunneries provided a haven for women oppressed by Chinese social customs, but he does not discuss how monastic life in general has been crucial for the social fabric and transmission of teachings in Buddhist societies. However, in a recent writing, he was critical of the division between monks and lay people that existed in Japanese Buddhism of the thirteenth century and he was supportive of the Pure Land reform movements that led to the marriage of monks and blurring of differences between monks and laity.<sup>13</sup> His failure to appreciate the central role and positive elements of monastic life in Buddhism perhaps reflects a wider neglect of religious structures, be they Christian or Buddhist, that is seen in his theology.

A few commentators have made the point that Song's theology lacks credibility because he lives outside Asia and is not directly involved in confronting Asian realities. Michael Northcott, reviewing *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, wrote:

Reading this volume it is difficult to see in what context Professor Song can now claim to be embedded. Is it possible to write Asian contextual theology in New York or Berkeley, California? Song fails to convey a real sense of engagement with the contemporary beliefs and practices of contemporary Asian Christians, or with those political or cultural struggles in which they may make common cause with their Buddhist or Muslim neighbours concerning democracy and human rights, or the cultural and environmental impacts of the rampant tiger of Asian capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

This view finds support when examining many of Song's reflections on Buddhism, which appear to lack a sense of real engagement with Asian Buddhism at a grassroots level. Only rarely does he mention personal encounters with Buddhists

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<sup>12</sup> According to the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* one of the six perfection's of a *bodhisattva* is perfect meditation. Kajiyama Yūichi, "The Sūtras I. Prajñāpāramitā and the Rise of Mahāyāna," in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori and others (New York: Crossroad, 1993): 139.

<sup>13</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 261-262.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Northcott, review of *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, by C. S. Song, *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (1995): 101.

and there is little reference to dialogue going on in local Asian communities. His repeated citation of the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhists, while important and heartfelt, is dated. Buddhist engagement with social realities in Asia today is far greater and more involved than Song suggests. His most recent book, *Believing Heart*, does endeavour to bring his references to Buddhism up to date; most notably he mentions the development of a socially concerned Buddhism in Taiwan. Yet, despite being well travelled in Asia, the overall impression is that he theologises from a distance and out of context. Perhaps this is to be expected given the fact that his theological discourse is, though detailed in argument, developed in broad strokes through use of a bewildering variety of materials, not only Asian. In this respect it may have a wide appeal and still be able to make significant contributions to Asian theological discourse, but it places limitations on his dialogue with Buddhism.

Finally, the most serious criticism to be levelled at Song is that he uses Buddhist resources to serve his own theological purposes, rather than engage with the deeper challenges they present to Christian theology. This charge is somewhat surprising to make given his expressed viewpoint on dialogue with other religions. Recently he wrote:

There are bound to be fundamental differences in what people of different religious traditions believe and do. But there is one problem we must avoid as much as possible, and that is coming to odds because of mutual misrepresentation and intentional or unintentional distortion of what each tradition believes and does.<sup>15</sup>

In another writing he was critical of a Jesuit priest in the West who made use of Buddhist symbols when teaching on prayer and meditation. Song claimed that the symbols were used without a proper understanding of their meaning. They had grown out of the contextual struggles of Asian Buddhists for liberation, which the priest failed to appreciate.<sup>16</sup> It has to be asked, however, if Song is not guilty of interpreting and using Buddhist resources in the very way he warns against and criticises others for doing. In the words of one book reviewer, in Song's theology the "use of non-Christian materials never manages to pose much of a threat to his biblically rooted theological convictions."<sup>17</sup> He makes creative use of Buddhist resources but often fails to explore adequately their Buddhist meaning. Ch'an stories are used as springboards for theological reflection and Buddhist terms are used to convey new theological understandings, but the Buddhist spirituality behind them is

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<sup>15</sup> Song, *Believing Heart*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Choan-Seng Song, "Christian Theology: Toward an Asian Reconstruction," 65-67.

<sup>17</sup> J. L. Fredricks, review of *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, by C. S. Song, *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (1995): 797.

not examined. The Buddhist focus on suffering, for example, is often cited by him as a challenge for Christians to rediscover this central concern in their own religion, yet the teachings on *anicca* and *anatta* that underpin the Buddhist understanding are rarely mentioned. Another commentator, R. Young, complained that Song misinterpreted the 'Parable of the Lost Son' in the *Lotus Sutra* in order to fit it into his theology of God's love. Young sought to give the Buddhist interpretation:

It is not the Father's love that matters as much as the devices he uses to reeducate his son. As such, the parable illustrates how the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas gradually lead individuals from provisional to absolute truth.<sup>18</sup>

Young is perhaps over-critical of Song in this matter, since the Buddha's compassion obviously underlies the parable and use of 'devices.' Nevertheless, the point that Song disregards Buddhist interpretations of the story is a valid one. He neglects to mention the central Mahayana teaching on 'skilful means' (*upaya kausalya*) that is taught in this parable, where the Buddha is understood to use various methods and teachings to lead people of different mental dispositions to the truth. A similar problem can be detected in Song's use of Buddhist terms like 'third eye' and concepts like *garbhadhatu*. He recognises that the experience of *satori* lies behind the Buddhist understanding of the 'third eye' but it is not explored in depth; and *garbhadhatu* is used with minimal reference to how it is understood and employed in the Buddhist tradition.

Song does make it clear that the aim of his theology is to interpret creatively Asian resources in relation to his Christian faith. He does succeed in incorporating Buddhist insights into his theological discourse, as with the Zen perception that intuitive wisdom is grounded in the everyday reality of life. Yet the major criticism remains: he makes use of Buddhist resources mainly for his own predetermined theological purposes and does not allow these resources to speak sufficiently for themselves and challenge his outlook as much as they could. This can be seen most clearly in the way in which he projects Buddhism as a religion of compassion. To an extent it is a fair representation of Buddhist spirituality, especially the popular Buddhism of East Asia and the Pure Land Buddhism that he favours. However, the importance of wisdom as a primary religious concept in Buddhism is lost. Just as he complains that Christian theology has for too long presented a 'truncated Christ' it could be argued that he has himself presented a truncated Buddhism. He projects a Buddhism divorced from its message of liberating wisdom and emphasis on

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Wong, *The Transposition of Christ*, 276.



meditative praxis; an image of Buddhism that may agree with his emphasis on God's love but fails to do justice to a wider Buddhist self-understanding.

### 6.2.3 Aloysius Pieris

Dialogue with Buddhism stands at the heart of Pieris' entire theological discourse. Through dialogue Buddhism has come to exert great influence on most aspects of his theology: his understanding of salvation and concern for praxis, to name only two. With Pieris, though, this dialogue takes place within a theological framework formed by his own Christian faith. Dialogue is integrated into a liberation theology where a commitment to the poor and oppressed, derived from the two biblical axioms, is central. This wider theological concern determines the priorities and parameters of his dialogue.

It is difficult to find fault with the presentation of Buddhism by Pieris, such is the breadth and depth of his dialogue. There are certain aspects of Buddhism, however, that are omitted from his dialogue and cause questions to be raised as to why this is so. The Sri Lankan Evangelical theologian, Vinoth Ramachandra, has pointed out that Pieris does not go far enough in his critique of Buddhist monasticism by limiting it to the abuse of wealth. Ramachandra explained that Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, though in many cases economically poor, are accorded great respect and privilege in society. This gives the *Sangha* and individual monks power and prestige. Jesus in the gospels, argued Ramachandra, is often portrayed as criticising the kind of advantaged religious status that monks are accorded. Pieris, he claimed, fails to comment on this or develop an adequate critique of monastic privilege in his assessment of the Buddhist *Sangha*.<sup>19</sup> In defence of Pieris it can be stated that his definition of mammon includes the selfish desire for privilege and power. In his writings Buddhist monks are criticised for their support of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka and their desire for Buddhism to be given a privileged place in society. Nonetheless, Ramachandra's critique in this area does serve to highlight some lacunae in Pieris' dialogue. Despite acknowledging the feminist critique of male privilege in Buddhist monasticism, and often referring to the abuse of wealth by monks, Pieris rarely critiques the institutional privilege accorded to Buddhist monks and the danger of spiritual pride that goes with it. In addition, Pieris does not discuss the issue of caste in Sri Lankan Buddhism, which was introduced into certain

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<sup>19</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 56.

Buddhist orders to limit who would be eligible to join the *Sangha*. This contradicts the Buddha's own teaching which admitted people of any caste into the *Sangha*.<sup>20</sup>

Another aspect of Buddhism that Pieris fails to address adequately relates to a possible depreciation of lay life. This is an inherent danger in the Theravada tradition that makes such a clear distinction between ordained and lay members within the religious community. He does, on the other hand, stress that a renewed monkhood, both Buddhist and Christian, is of critical value for the development of liberation theology in Asia. This may be understandable given the crucial role of the Buddhist monk in society and the ways in which Christian monastics have established fruitful dialogue with their Buddhist counterparts. However, Jesus was no monk (in the institutional sense) and was highly critical of those who looked upon themselves as somehow more religiously important than others. In contrast to his silence on differences in status between the laity and monks in Buddhism, Pieris is very critical of the privileged position of the priest and the hierarchy of power in his own Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup>

It is unclear why Pieris is reluctant to be critical of the Buddhist *Sangha* in the above matters. It may be that he feels that Christians have been too quick to judge and not sufficiently willing to learn from Buddhism in the past. This has certainly been the case throughout the missionary history of Christianity in Sri Lanka, which has scarred Buddhist-Christian dialogue there. It is therefore understandable, especially given the fact that Pieris is theologising from within the Sri Lankan context, that he would want to avoid being over-critical. Yet he is willing to be critical of the *Sangha* in other areas, and his lack of reference to issues relating to monastic privilege, caste and religious elitism is notable.<sup>22</sup>

#### 6.2.4 A Comparative Assessment

The different, though often related, theological concerns that the three theologians bring to dialogue with Buddhism are important in defining the nature and scope of their dialogue. Koyama's dialogue impresses through the manner of his

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<sup>20</sup> Limiting membership in certain sects of the *Sangha* to caste affiliation began in Sri Lanka in or possibly before 1753. Caste has been a contentious issue that has led to splits into various sects in the Sri Lankan *Sangha*. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 166-167, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Pieris, "A Liturgical Anticipation," 79-80.

<sup>22</sup> For a brief Roman Catholic critique of the Buddhist *Sangha's* appropriation of caste distinctions in Sri Lanka see N. Abeyasingha, "The 'Context' of the Christian Life and Faith in Ceylon," *SEAJT* 15, no. 2 (1974): 88.

personal and existential encounter with Buddhist teachings and monasticism. Song is refreshing in the attention he gives to the folktales and aesthetic traditions of East Asian Buddhists - forms of popular piety and religious expression that are often neglected in dialogue. Pieris leads the Christian into a greater appreciation of the liberative thrust that lies at the heart of Buddhism. Common to all three theologians is that they look upon Buddhism in a holistic fashion, treating it not simply as a system of beliefs but as a multifaceted living religion that has influenced the spirituality and socio-political makeup of Asians down the centuries.

It is impossible, given that Buddhism is a religion of diverse and rich traditions, for a single theologian to be comprehensive in her or his dialogue. It also has to be kept in mind that the three theologians have been in dialogue with other religious traditions and with various theological movements in Christianity. Of the three theologians, Koyama and Pieris come across as having been involved in a more in-depth and personally meaningful dialogue than Song. It is Pieris, though, who comes closest to being all-embracing. In terms of the outline of various forms of dialogue given in Chapter Two, he can be said to be a participant in all areas. His method of 'enreligionisation' has afforded him great knowledge of Buddhist thought and experiential exposure to Buddhist practice. His scholarly abilities in Buddhism, shown through his familiarity with primary Buddhist sources, are impressive. Whereas Koyama and Song tend to make use of English translations of Buddhist texts and teachings, Pieris is knowledgeable in both Pali and Sanskrit. Pieris also has the benefit of continuing to live and work in the Buddhist context, which enables his reflections to be up to date and rooted in the life struggles of Asian people. It comes as no surprise, then, to read one reviewer's comment that Pieris' writing "reveals a depth of understanding of the heritages of both Christian faith and Buddhism that is attained by few."<sup>23</sup>

Of the criticisms that have been made of all three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism, the most serious is directed at Song. There is a failure in his work to present Buddhism as it would see itself. Moreover, the impression is given that he makes use of Buddhist resources to support his own theological arguments instead of allowing them to challenge his theology. It could be argued that Koyama's early attempts in Thailand to accommodate the gospel by employing Buddhist concepts, such as his Christian interpretation of the 'Four Noble Truths,' demonstrate the same error as Song's in using Buddhist sources to serve his theological purpose. However,

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<sup>23</sup> Jay C. Rochelle, review of *Love Meets Wisdom*, by Aloysius Pieris, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990): 277.

Koyama explained the Buddhist understanding of the concepts first, and later in his career he gave up such attempts at accommodation, preferring instead to engage in a more dialogical approach with Buddhist thought as seen in his reflections on *sunyata*. It is perhaps not surprising given Song's theological framework, where the set task is to find Christian meaning in Buddhist and other Asian resources, that he uses Buddhism in the way he does, but it does contradict his belief that religions should be allowed to define themselves. It has to be stressed, though, that in other ways he does show a good understanding of Buddhist thought, a sensitivity to East Asian Buddhist spirituality, and an impressive use of Buddhist resources.

Despite the criticisms made of all three theologians, it should not deflect from the fact that their dialogue with Buddhism has been of significance. It has contributed to Buddhist-Christian dialogue in general. It has also contributed to the development of Asian theology and to global theological debate, areas to which the final section of this chapter now turns its attention.

## **6.3 Theological Issues and Challenges Emerging from the Dialogue with Buddhism**

### **6.3.1 The Interreligious Aspect of Asian Christian Identity**

#### ***Introduction***

One area of significant theological interest that emerges from the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism, in particular from the work of Kosuke Koyama, is concerned with Christian identity. Christian identity in Asia is formed, they show, through contact with other religions. Due to the cultural context in which they live, the indigenous languages they use, the worldview in which they have been brought up, and the communities to which they try to relate - all shaped mostly by religious traditions other than Christianity - Asian Christians, whether they like it or not, inherit an interreligious aspect. Their religious identity is not simply a product of Christian faith alone, but they bring to their faith minds that have been influenced by the teachings, practices and customs of other religions to a degree not found in the West. Even in the Philippines, where most Christians in Asia live, studies have

shown that the pre-Christian primal religiosity of the people did not die out and that it continues to influence Christian identity and popular religiosity.<sup>24</sup>

Koyama's awareness of the interreligious aspect of Christian identity, as described earlier, grew initially through his encounters with Buddhism and Christians in Thailand. He perceived that religious influences from Buddhism were acting upon Christian minds and came to understand that the religious identity of Asian Christians was given an interreligious dimension. Recognition of this can be found throughout his theology: in his discussion on 'kitchen theology'; in his efforts to contextualise the gospel message using Buddhist terms; in evaluation of his own Mahayana background; and in his integration of Buddhist teachings, especially on overcoming greed, into his theological discourse. It is impossible to discern the full extent and ways in which Buddhist influences have worked upon his Christian identity and theological expression. In great part, as he is aware, this is because such influences are often at work unconsciously upon the Christian. What is learned, though, is that interreligious dialogue is an unavoidable and necessary part of theological discourse in Asia, needed for clarifying and enriching Christian identity. He alerts the general theological community to the likelihood that the teachings and practices of other religions will in various ways influence the shape of Christian faith and theological expression in Asia.

Both Song and Pieris reinforce Koyama's insight into the interreligious aspect of Christian identity. This was seen in Song's example of the interreligious formation of a Palestinian woman, where he called for a new appreciation of religious syncretism. He does not mention specific Buddhist influences on his own theological mindset, but traces can be discerned through his preference for Mahayana Buddhist resources. Some commentators have pointed to other hidden Buddhist influences in his work.<sup>25</sup> Pieris awakens the reader to the fact that Christians in Asia have for too long denied themselves contact with the teachings and practices of other religions because they have looked down upon their local cultures and religions for centuries. He stands out as one who has become deeply engaged in developing a Christian spirituality informed by Buddhism. This is seen in his attempts to incorporate silence

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<sup>24</sup> Salvador T. Martinez, "Jesus Christ in Popular Piety in the Philippines," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Faith and Cultures Series, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 247-257.

<sup>25</sup> In-sing Leung argued that the importance Song assigns to the concept of 'relationship' in his theology is in part because of Buddhist influence. In-sing Leung, review of *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, by C. S. Song, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984): 152-153. Sun Hwan Pyun argued that Song's portrayal of Jesus in solidarity with people in their suffering and struggles reflects the influence of "Bodhisattvaistic humanism." Sun Hwan Pyun, "Other Religions and Theology," *EJAT* 3, no. 2 (1985): 352.



and meditation into the liturgy, as well as using Buddhist terminology and concepts in his writings. Other Asian writers, such as Bishop Ratna Bamrungtrakul and Chung Hyun Kyung, who have recognised the need for an 'interior dialogue,' confirm the basic insight of Koyama that Asian Christian identity is formed out of contact and dialogue with Buddhism and other religions. There is a general awareness, then, that the Asian religious context is a major factor that influences the theological perspective and religious sensibilities of many Asian Christians, and this raises various theological issues and challenges considered below.

### ***Awareness of an Interplay of Religious Influences***

An obvious challenge that arises, in particular to Asian Christians but also to those in the West, is to recognise the interplay of influences from different religions acting upon the minds of Christians. This is most obvious in Asia where religions have coexisted for centuries. It has often been assumed, by Asians as well as Westerners, that Asians converting to Christianity would cast off their old religious identity in order to take on a new and all-embracing Christian one. The three theologians show that Asian Christians, both converts and long-standing Christians, bring to their faith influences from other religions which have formed the local and national communities to which they belong. This is especially the case in Buddhist countries like Thailand where the Christian community represents a very small percentage of the population and where marriage between Buddhists and Christians is commonplace. Theological development in contexts like these must involve an existential struggle and interior dialogue that seeks to make sense of Christian faith in relation to other religions acting upon the Asian mind. There is, therefore, a clear and important challenge to Asian churches emerging out of the dialogue of the three theologians: to recognise the complex and evolving nature of religious identity in their multireligious context, and the interreligious aspect that is a part of it.

From a Western contextual perspective it might seem that developing theological responses to issues of class and gender, highlighted by Latin American liberation and feminist theologies, as well as other areas like science and secularism, is a more pressing need than responding to the interreligious aspect of Christian identity suggested by Asian theology. It can be argued, however, that there is a growing need in the West to develop an awareness of the interplay of religions upon people. With the movement of peoples and their religions around the globe, Westerners too are increasingly influenced by religions other than Christianity. In addition, the New Age movement has seen great growth in recent years. Though

somewhat amorphous, the movement draws on beliefs from various religions.<sup>26</sup> There are also Westerners who become Buddhists, and they often take whatever influence they have received from Christianity into their acquired Buddhist beliefs and practices. Patrick Hawk commented on Westerners who reject Christianity and turn to Zen:

Sooner or later most of these people find that they must deal with their Christianity. Even though they may have consciously repudiated Christianity, they are still unconsciously Christian.<sup>27</sup>

There is a need, then, for Christians in the West, despite the forces of secularisation, to realise that the religious identity of people here is increasingly subject to an interplay of influences from various religions. The insights of the three theologians into Christian identity in the Asian context serve to highlight this growing need. A greater awareness of the interplay of religions would provide an important resource for the discernment of religious identity and enable a deeper interreligious dialogue to take place.

### ***Asian Contributions to Theology and Spirituality***

The discovery of the interreligious aspect of Christian identity ties in with the work of theologians who have in recent decades highlighted the contextual nature of Christian life and theology. Some theologians have shown that religions have always borrowed consciously and unconsciously from each other. Archie Lee, for example, has pointed out how studies of the Hebrew Bible reveal that “syncretism lies at the core of biblical tradition.”<sup>28</sup> The spread of European Christianity also bears witness to the adoption and adaptation of beliefs and values from the surrounding religions of the Greek, Celtic and Germanic peoples.<sup>29</sup> It has even been shown that the theology of Tertullian (c. 155-260), famous for his repudiation of other religions and philosophies of the time, was in fact greatly influenced by Stoicism and Roman culture.<sup>30</sup> Buddhism has clearly influenced the work of the three Asian theologians in ways that are positive for Christian life and theology. Their theologies reflect

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<sup>26</sup> John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 19-39.

<sup>27</sup> Hawk, “The Role of the Teacher in Buddhist/Christian Formation,” 24. Westerners who become Buddhists have played an important part in the development of Engaged Buddhism with its emphasis on social justice and peace work, which some commentators consider as possibly influenced by Christianity. Queen, “Introduction,” 33.

<sup>28</sup> Archie Lee, “Syncretism from the Perspectives of Chinese and Biblical Tradition,” *Ching Feng* 39, no. 1 (1996): 17.

<sup>29</sup> Anton Wessels, *Europe: Was it Ever Really Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> González, *Christian Thought Revisited*, 4-7.

Buddhist influences in the way they interpret Christian faith and human reality. Their witness suggests that Asian Christians, because of their interreligious formation, will contribute new theological insights to the wider Christian community and introduce new practices that will enrich Christian spirituality.

In the area of contributing to general theological debate and development, it is important that Western theologians recognise that their Asian counterparts bring a special interreligious formation with them to theology. Even for theologians like Song and Koyama, who have spent many years living in the West, the fact of their Asian birth and upbringing enables them to reflect theologically in a different way from Western people. In terms used in the field of Religious Studies, Asian Christians can be described as both 'insiders' and 'outsiders': they speak as insiders because of their unique exposure to other religions and their ongoing dialogue with them; yet their perspective is essentially Christian and therefore they remain as outsiders. This dual characteristic means that Asian Christian theologians can provide debates in the areas of dialogue and the theology of religions with a deeper knowledge of other religions' beliefs and practices. They have the advantage of understanding these religions not simply as systems of belief but as living traditions that incorporate both a view of life and a way of life. They also speak the same languages that these religions naturally use to express themselves, and can empathise with Asian epistemological understandings of reality that are often different from Western and Christian perceptions. This should enable a more mature understanding of religions to develop and a deeper dialogue with them to be pursued. Asian theologians have already begun to influence the wider Christian community to a deeper appreciation of the positive elements of other religions' beliefs and practices, and to a recognition that the Spirit of God is at work outside the confines of the church. In doing so they ask Christians worldwide to have a broader view of God's work in the world and to reassess old theological prejudices that have prevented this from being realised.

In the area of Christian spirituality,<sup>31</sup> Koyama has pointed out the possibility of developing a 'Christian interreligious spirituality' derived from a conscious drawing on beliefs, values, and practices from Buddhism and other religions. Christian interreligious spirituality in this context can be understood as an Asian way of being and living as a Christian. The intent is not to be syncretistic but there is recognition

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<sup>31</sup> Spirituality is understood here as Christian life developed through a relationship with God and through a general openness to reality. See Samuel Rayan, "A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context," *SEDOS Bulletin on the Net* (1999): 4 [Journal on-line]; available from <http://www.sedos.org/english/ryan2.html>; Internet; accessed 23 May 2000.

that God is at work in the religious traditions of Asia, in ways that may differ from the Christian tradition. To be faithful to God and more committed to building human communities of love and justice in Asia there needs, then, to be an openness to learning from other religions. This is still very much in its early and experimental days. However, the work of the three theologians and other Asian Christians suggests that it is a viable and exciting development. All three theologians, especially Pieris, have shown how it is possible to integrate Buddhist teachings and practices in a way that enriches Christian worship, discipleship, and theological reflection. There is also evidence of less obvious but other important Buddhist influences in their lives. This can be seen, for instance, in Koyama's work. He exhibits a Zen predilection for delight in paradox and mystery, which is reflected in the way he relates to paradoxes in the Christian faith. Morse stated that Koyama found the paradox of the cross to be "intuitively meaningful" because of his Japanese Zen background.<sup>32</sup> This acceptance of paradox and ultimate mystery is also detectable in his theology of religions, where Jesus stands at the centre of salvation yet is open to the truths contained in other religions. It may be that Buddhism has contributed not only to his ability to appreciate the complex and paradoxical nature of reality and religious meaning but also to cope with it. Another area of Buddhist influence can be discerned in his concern for people's inner motivations, intentions and attitudes, and his stress on developing a 'crucified mind,' which appear to reflect the Japanese mindset shaped by Buddhism where emphasis is placed on introspection and interior insight.<sup>33</sup> Such examples from Koyama's work provide evidence that an interreligious spirituality is a positive and living reality for Asian Christians, which should cause the church to rethink the nature of Christian discipleship.

There is a fear expressed in different churches, especially in the West, that the quest for what has been described here as a Christian interreligious spirituality is harmful. The fear is that it will devalue the understanding of Jesus' unique and constitutive role in salvation, bring about a lessening in evangelistic fervour, and also lead to syncretism. There is concern that certain Asian theologians, like the three of this study, may be going too far in accepting the value of other religions while neglecting central demands of the Christian faith. It is this fear that Samartha, as mentioned in Chapter Two, sees as having led to a weakening of commitment to

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<sup>32</sup> Paradox in the sense that God's power and love are to be discovered in the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross and in the violent injustice the cross represents. Morse, *Kosuke Koyama*, 24. For an appreciation of Zen paradox in Koyama's work see his meditation on Buson's haikus in Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 78-80.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the Buddhist influence on the Japanese mindset see the previously mentioned article by Kishimoto, "Some Japanese Cultural Traits and Religions," 110-121.

interreligious dialogue in both the Roman Catholic and WCC churches.<sup>34</sup> It is reflected in the general tone of the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*<sup>35</sup> and in the critical responses to Chung Hyun Kung's contribution to the WCC Canberra Assembly.

Asian theologians, though, have to struggle with the fact that their exposure to other religions does impact positively on their Christian faith and causes them to be critical of exclusivism and its accompanying missiology. The question arises as to how far to go in reinterpreting inherited Christian doctrines and practices in the light of their interreligious dialogue. Sugirtharajah, in his introduction to developments in Asian theology, commented that some theologians desire to move beyond the model of contextualisation that sees the primary theological task as somehow inserting the gospel into Asian realities.<sup>36</sup> They view this as having been too polemical and apologetical in nature, and see a need not simply to adjust the Christian message to Asian realities but to rethink the entirety of the Christian message through engagement with them. The danger, as critics see it, is that this rethinking undermines fundamental Christian doctrines and leads to religious relativism. This will be considered in more detail later. It is to be noted though that the role of doctrine is a major area of debate between Asian and Western theologians, and among Asian theologians themselves. There appears a danger of relativism, of going too far down the syncretistic route in Christian interreligious spirituality, but in my opinion the three Asian theologians point to the necessity of developing a spirituality that in some measure recognises and integrates the interreligious aspect. The reasons for this have already been outlined: it is an unavoidable development given the religious formation of the Asian mind; it enables the Christian faith to speak a meaningful word to the Asian context and to join others in building community where there is mutual respect and justice; and it can lead to a deeper understanding of who God is and where God is to be found, and also contribute to a more authentic Christian discipleship.

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<sup>34</sup> Samartha, *Between Two Cultures*, 172. For an Asian Evangelical viewpoint that reflects similar fears see Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?* 121.

<sup>35</sup> *Redemptoris Missio* contained a veiled warning against Asian theological developments that were seen to be undermining traditional christology and the primary evangelistic concern in mission. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements 1974-1991* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 171. It was also widely reported that the head of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Tomko, warned Asian bishops against certain Asian theological developments that placed dialogue before proclamation. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Introduction," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 4-5.



Despite the doctrinal and other differences that remain between religions, there can be no doubt that the influence from other religions can stimulate and enrich Christian life and theology. This has been the experience of the three theologians, which cannot simply be dismissed as unchristian if, as I believe, human experience of God in the socio-religious context is to be taken seriously as a *locus theologicus* for an understanding of who God is and where S/he is to be found. Many Christians who have engaged in interreligious prayer also confirm the value of developing an interreligious spirituality. Despite doctrinal differences between religions and uncertainty in the field of the theology of religions, they have decided to go ahead with interreligious prayer. In doing so they have sensed the Spirit's call for engagement in such dialogue and praxis, and have come to a deeper awareness of God's presence.<sup>37</sup> It may be that there is a need to live with paradox and uncertainty on the theological level, at least until further developments in theology in Asia and elsewhere help to clarify the nature and scope of a Christian interreligious spirituality. In the end, wrote Patrick Hawk, "The real integration of traditions is not in doctrines or ecumenical meetings or action; it is something that takes place in the souls of individuals struggling on their own spiritual paths."<sup>38</sup> This is a struggle the three theologians are involved in and in which they and others need time to develop. It is a struggle that, given the interreligious context, cannot wait for doctrinal clarity and sanction before being entered into but which, through its praxis, is leading to new theological understandings and prompting a reconstruction of theological doctrines.

### 6.3.2 Theology in the Asian Context

#### **Introduction**

Issues and challenges arising from the understanding and practice of theology itself present a second area of theological debate raised by the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. The meaning of the word 'theology' has developed and changed down the centuries.<sup>39</sup> The three theologians, through dialogue with Buddhism, have sought to understand anew what theology is and how to go about it.

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<sup>37</sup> For example, see Pierre F. de Bethune, "The Bond of Peace, A Few Theological Reflections about Interreligious Dialogue," *Pro Dialogo* 98, no. 2 (1998): 159-165.

<sup>38</sup> Hawk, "The Role of the Teacher in Buddhist/Christian Formation," 28.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Whaling, *Christian Theology and World Religions: A Global Approach*, Contemporary Christian Studies (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), 49-71.

As a first stage in theological reconstruction they have been outspoken in their criticism of much of Western theology and its influence upon Asia. There is a desire to discover an Asian sense to theology through rethinking its nature, purpose and method in relation to Asian contextual realities. In attempting this, the three combine with other Third World theologians in challenging the dominance Western theology has exercised over global Christianity and in questioning many of its doctrinal and epistemological assumptions.

The development of theology with an Asian sense has been at the centre of Song's dialogue with Buddhism as outlined earlier. It is a critical theology: critical of the agenda, method, and claims of what is called Western traditional theology. In contrast to the Western tradition, he shifts the focus firmly away from God and philosophical query towards the stories of Asian people's everyday lives and struggles. The purpose of his theology is to find meaning in Asia's religious and social contexts, and for theology to act as a liberative force in society. The method recommended for achieving this is immersion in the Asian context and dialogue with the spiritual meaning to be found therein.

Both Koyama and Pieris agree with the broad outline of Asian theology put forward by Song. They also add more depth to Song's methodology, through Koyama's emphasis on personal encounter with Buddhism and Pieris' promotion of 'enreligionisation' and voluntary poverty. The desire of all three theologians is for the Christian faith to be understandable and meaningful to Asian people. Moreover, they show that dialogue with Asia's poor and their religions brings about new theological insights and sets a new theological agenda for Asian churches.

The need to develop a distinctive Asian theology is also a recurring theme in wider Asian church and theological circles. It has been a central concern of the FABC since the 1970s and again dominated the meeting in Rome of the Synod of Asian Bishops' in 1999.<sup>40</sup> A similar interest - where people in their living context present the theological focus - has also developed among churches and theologians of the CCA over the years.<sup>41</sup> Evangelical scholars in Asia have likewise been to the

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<sup>40</sup> For a reflection on the Rome Synod see Jacques Dupuis, "Jesus with an Asian Face," *SEDOS Bulletin on the Net* (1999): 6 pages [journal on-line]; available from [http://www.sedos.org/english/dupuis\\_1.htm](http://www.sedos.org/english/dupuis_1.htm); Internet; accessed 16 February 2000.

<sup>41</sup> For example see T. V. Philip, "Christian Conference of Asia: A Historical Overview," *AJT* 9, no. 1 (1995): 2-29; Steven G. Mackie, "God's People in Asia: A Key Concept in Asian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42 (1989): 215-240; also, various articles in Dhyanchand Carr, ed., *God, Christ and God's People in Asia* (Hong Kong: CCA Theological Concerns, 1995). The concern for the poor tends to dominate CCA proceedings, though the relationship to cultures and religions is seen as very important.

fore in arguing for a more contextually relevant theology, though here the method proposed puts less stress on dialogue and the purpose is more clearly spelled out as evangelistic than in the CCA and FABC.<sup>42</sup>

### ***A New Theological Focus***

The three theologians and other Asian Christians argue that a new Asian theological focus, on people's suffering and spiritual longing, stands in sharp contrast to the more abstract concerns of theology in the West. Before looking at the challenges this new focus presents, it is important to consider criticisms that have been made against the Asian theologians' evaluation of Western theology. A few writers have argued that the critique of Western theology vigorously made by Song and others is a poor basis for the development of Asian theology.<sup>43</sup> It is viewed as too negative in its appraisal and considered unfair by failing to recognise the variety present in current Western theology and the radical nature of much of it. There is some truth in this. In many ways the predominant theology that Western missionaries brought to Asia is open to severe criticism, but constant repetition of deserved criticism can leave the reader asking if this is not simply avoiding dealing with the harder task of developing a positive theology for Asia. There is also a tendency at times, particularly with Song, to overstate the critique, creating an impression that all Western theology is fundamentally wrong and to blame for every church ill in Asia.

Yet there are, I believe, several reasons for appreciating the Asian critique of Western theology and for supporting its continuance if done thoughtfully. Firstly, the three theologians are critical of a particular form emanating from the West, called by Song 'traditional theology.' Samuel Rayan, an Indian Jesuit theologian, has recently given a clear summary and detailed description of the kind of Western theology that Song and other Asians criticise, which he calls 'colonial theology.'<sup>44</sup> He describes this dominant tradition of theology as being pro-capitalist, male, individualistic, too theoretical, and over-dogmatic in nature. The problem for Asian theologians is that it is still a powerful force in Asian churches and in theological education. This

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<sup>42</sup> For example, see Valson Thampy, *Rediscovering Mission: Towards a Non-Western Missionary Paradigm* (New Delhi: TRACI, 1995); Chris Sugden, *Seeking the Asian Face of Jesus: The Practice and Theology of Christian Social Witness in Indonesia and India 1974-1996*. Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford, Regnum Books International, 1997); Bong Rin Ro, "Evangelical Responses to Religious Pluralism in Asia," *ERT* 17: 1, 1993: 70-81.

<sup>43</sup> Moonjang Lee, "Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest," *AJT* 13, no. 2 (1999): 258-262; Alistair Kee, review of *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 148-149.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Rayan, "Decolonization of Theology," *SEDOS Bulletin* 30, no. 11 (1998): 297-306. For another critique of traditional theology see Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology*, 2-10.

theological system, derived and still supported from the West, continues to be the primary tradition with which Asian theologians need to dialogue. So Rayan's claim that "a negative but a necessary aspect of our starting point is a critique of Western theology"<sup>45</sup> remains valid despite the development of contextual theologies in Asia. An important point, stressed by Rayan and Song, is that the critique of the West is only the beginning of Asian theology, not its end or main concern. Another reason for supporting the critique from Asia is because it is debatable if it has impacted on mainstream theological education and church life in the West. Asian theologians are in a sense forced into dialogue with Western traditions in theology, but have Western theologians listened to their Eastern counterparts? This, I believe, is only beginning to happen. Moreover, a continuing critique is important to ensure that no revisionist reading of missionary history from the West paints a kinder picture of Western missions and their theology than is actually warranted. Finally, it has to be remembered that Asian theologians are struggling for a distinct identity. They are aware that the idea of Asian theology is a relatively new one and that its development necessarily involves a critique of the past and present. Younger Asian theologians will surely in the future feel less need to concern themselves with the West as theological thinking in Asia develops.

The new focus does present certain fundamental challenges to theology in general and to the church. It calls for a shift away from a theological approach where philosophical ideas and doctrinal debates dominate, which I believe have distanced theology from the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens and even church members in the West and elsewhere. Theology, the three teach us, is to be rooted in people's human sufferings and spiritual longings; this is where God is to be found anew. Dialogue with Buddhism has clearly helped the three theologians to discover the new focus in people and their living context. Importantly, this dialogue has confirmed, and perhaps even helped them to discover, a similar theological focus held by Jesus and the biblical witness. This is construed not simply as a contextual demand but as representing the pedagogical approach of Jesus to be adopted by the church. This is an important recovery of the biblical witness, which interreligious dialogue has aided. Also to be welcomed is the shift in conception of theology's role in relation to the church demanded by the new focus. Theology is no longer seen primarily as the handmaid of the church, but as the servant of the world community. With this understanding the church itself is seen as taking on a servant role as it seeks to be open and responsive to the needs of people and creation. In this way the three

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<sup>45</sup> Rayan, "Decolonization," 302.

theologians successfully challenge an understanding of the church which is concerned mainly with its own needs and expansion.

### ***Immersion in the Asian Context***

The theological method of immersion in the Asian context, suggested by the three theologians, raises a number of important issues. Clearly evident in their work, human experience in relation to socio-religious contextual realities is seen as a *locus theologicus*. This, along with the two established foci of the Bible and church tradition, is seen as a third essential element contributing to the development of theology. The Asian context is viewed as a potential source of revelation or liberative meaning to be brought into a critical dialogue with the Bible and Christian tradition within the faith experience of the Christian. In particular, the spiritual longing of the human heart through people's struggles for justice and for liberation in their various religious traditions is recognised as a sign of God's presence in Asia outside the church. Hence, immersion in the Asian context is proposed as a theological imperative in order to understand who and where God is.

At this point it is worth considering what has become a loud and sustained critique made by Asian Evangelicals of the three theologians and others like them. The critique is directed at the source of their entire theological framework and methodology. It claims that the theological presuppositions and approach of the theologians derives from the Western culture of the Enlightenment and liberal thought that sprang from it. Their work, it is argued, is but a recapitulation of liberal theology in Asian guise. To support this judgement, the three theologians' ideas are shown to contain similar themes to those in Enlightenment and Western liberal thought: such as placing the human subject at the centre of theology; questioning the role of dogma as representing absolute truth; accepting a pluralist agenda when it comes to matters of religious truth and theology of religions; and reducing the understanding of salvation to socio-economic deliverance. While the Evangelical scholars agree on the need for contextualisation of the gospel, they make a further criticism, charging that the three theologians allow the context to dominate and interpret the reading of the biblical text. As a consequence of all the above, the Evangelical critique claims that the biblical witness is relativised, the primary concern for evangelism and church planting is forsaken, and the role of revelation and atonement in salvation is made subordinate to creation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For examples of such criticisms see: Bong Rin Ro, "Evangelical Responses," 70-81; Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*; Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*



There could appear to be some truth in the above Evangelical argument. All three theologians have studied in the West where theology has sought to relate to the Enlightenment's influence on modernity, and all share positions that appear among liberal theologians from the West. The Evangelical critique, however, is weak on several points. In general, it is of interest that the critics are themselves dependent on Western theologians and writers like Leslie Newbigin for developing their argument. As well as this, they fail to mention positive challenges that arose out of Enlightenment thought, which saw the church rightly accused of being associated with privilege and oppressive power in society.<sup>47</sup> It is to be doubted if the critics have studied the works of the three theologians in sufficient quantity and detail to justify such sweeping criticisms. In this regard both Yung's critique of Koyama and Song, and Ramachandra's critique of Pieris, are lacking in depth. For example, Ramachandra fails to appreciate that Pieris stresses how his theology differs from liberal traditions in the West. They also neglect the influence from the Asian context upon the theologians' work. Koyama and Pieris have been clearly influenced by Buddhism in developing their theological positions. Song may give the impression of using Buddhism to suit his theological needs more than being challenged by it, but even he clearly states that exposure to Asia's religious and socio-political realities has had a crucial bearing on his theology. Yet these Asian influences are not explored in detail but assumed by the Evangelical critics to fall within the organising theological framework determined by Western liberalism. Finally, the Evangelical concern that the three theologians undermine the importance of the Bible appears to derive from a general disagreement about how the authority of scripture is to be understood more than from a neglect of scripture by the three theologians, who make constant reference to scripture in their work, and to ways in which it has a certain primacy and interpretative role over the context. They could be accused of being selective in the biblical passages they choose and their interpretation of these passages could be questioned, but then this could equally be applied to any theologian and to the critics themselves.

Overall the critique appears to be motivated more by fundamental theological differences within the Christian church, which have existed for centuries, than by a careful and honest dialogue with the three theologians' work. For this reason Koyama was bluntly dismissive of Yung's critique of him.<sup>48</sup> The Evangelicals would

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<sup>47</sup> Albert C. Outler, "Pietism and Enlightenment: Alternatives to Tradition," in *Christian Spirituality: Post Reformation and Modern*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, ed. Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1990), 251.

<sup>48</sup> Kosuke Koyama, review of *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian*, by Hwa Yung, *IBMR* 22, no. 3 (1998): 135.

obviously not agree with the assumption that human experience in the socio-religious context is a locus for theology along with church tradition and the Bible.<sup>49</sup> Yet I would argue that it has been through the insightful contributions to theological debate of the three theologians, and many others like them from the Third World, not simply influences from the Enlightenment, that Christians in the West have been challenged to take socio-religious contextual realities more seriously as a source for theology. It is to be regretted that the critics did not enter into a genuine dialogue with the three theologians. This would have helped to clarify the sources of theological development in Asian theology and would have provided an opportunity for Asian Christians who take opposing positions to share their concerns. Genuine dialogue, it seems, is not only lacking between religions but in Asia, as elsewhere, it is lacking within the Christian community itself.

Where the socio-religious context is seen not only as a vehicle for expressing the gospel, as in some Evangelical circles, but as in some way contributing to a deeper understanding of the gospel, there is general agreement on the need for immersion in contextual realities. Pieris is the most radical and controversial in this respect by his promotion of a process of 'enreligionisation.' He is aware that this method is open to question in terms of its "theological validity and its pastoral feasibility."<sup>50</sup> The kind of pastoral problems that might arise were highlighted at a seminar on Buddhist-Christian mixed marriages. Pieris advised that children of an interreligious marriage should be brought up in both traditions, and later allowed to choose which to follow. Other participants, however, pointed out that this would be too confusing for children and that it would be better for their spiritual growth to be rooted in one tradition.<sup>51</sup> However, Pieris suggested that families start with small steps to find points of contact between their two religions. Since there is no model to follow, experimentation is required. He commended couples who shared, for example, in a time of silence at the end of the day.<sup>52</sup> Seen in this way, as a gradual process, the kind of immersion that he advocates appears possible for ordinary people of both religions. Nonetheless the potential for confusion remains great. Much would depend on the atmosphere in which dialogue takes place. G. Somarama, a Sri

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<sup>49</sup> Bevans observes that ways in which contextualisation are viewed and valued depends on people's basic theological bias, of which there are two kinds: a creation-centred approach that recognises God's presence in the world (approximate to the position of the three theologians), and a redemption-based approach that tends to stress the fallen nature of creation (approximate to the position of the Evangelical critics). Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism," 120.

<sup>51</sup> Tarsie Fernando, "The Report of the Consultation on Buddhist-Christian Mixed Marriages," *Dialogue* n.s. 5, nos. 2 & 3 (1978): 118.

<sup>52</sup> Pieris, "Doctrinal, Legal and Cultural Factors in Buddhist-Christian Mixed Marriages," 105.

Lankan Christian, has written that Christians in the rural areas of his country face persecution after conversions to Christianity stirred strong anti-Christian feelings among Buddhists.<sup>53</sup> With a lack of official support from church and Buddhist leaders, tensions in society, and little in the way of models to follow, the ability of ordinary people to take part in the kind of in-depth dialogue that Pieris advocates will be restricted.

Difficult theological issues are raised by Pieris' immersion in Buddhism. In his experience of meditation under a Buddhist monk he spoke of "forgetting Christianity, to the point of denying it, to receive the Buddhist kenosis."<sup>54</sup> It is true that many Christians in Asia have taken part in Buddhist disciplines and found benefit from them without diminishing their commitment to Christian faith. Pieris also points out that Buddhist monks have, similarly, come to appreciate the unique nature of Jesus' identification with the poor without giving up Buddhism.<sup>55</sup> It is doubtful though if the 'enreligionisation' Pieris himself has gone through will appeal to most Christians. It is not easy to maintain a commitment to one's own faith and at the same time enter into a process seen as denying its existence! Some reviewers have suggested that his method is most suited to Christian religious orders, and that his theology is primarily addressed to them.<sup>56</sup> Christian religious would have background schooling in discernment and apophatic theology, and the support of community reflection as well as appreciation of the monastic ethos. From a pastoral perspective, then, Christians might be better advised to draw first on the monastic traditions of Christianity where available, which Pieris himself recognises as having kept alive 'gnostic' spirituality in the church.

The way of immersion that Pieris recommends is practised by only a small number of Christians at present. Many Christians, while remaining open and respectful towards other religions through a 'dialogue of life,' have neither the time nor inclination to engage in an in-depth dialogue of the kind undergone by Pieris. Yet, despite pastoral, theological and practical problems, Pieris and the other two theologians point to an important general direction for Asian Christians to travel: to become more involved in dialogue with the religious context through real exposure to the beliefs and practices of others. This in some ways is unavoidable given the religious formation of Asians discussed earlier and the need to identify themselves

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<sup>53</sup> G. P. V. Somarama, "Beleaguered Christianity in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *AJT* 9, no. 1 (1995): 47-62.

<sup>54</sup> Pieris, "Two Encounters," 143.

<sup>55</sup> Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, footnote 310, p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see N. R. Thelle, book review of *Love Meets Wisdom*, by Aloysius Pieris, *IBMR* 14, no. 4 (1990): 184-185.

with the lives and struggles of the poor who are mostly of other religions. But, I would argue, a conscious immersion in the religiosity of the other is to be commended because it recognises that from it new and deeper understandings of Christian faith will emerge. In the case of Pieris this immersion has resulted in clarifying idiomatic differences between Buddhism and Christianity in the field of religious language and spirituality, and showing how both religions can positively contribute to a more holistic theology of liberation. Few Christians will feel called to follow Pieris in such an in-depth immersion in Buddhism, but those who do should be supported in their efforts and encouraged to share their struggles and insights within the wider Christian community.

Questions remain, however, as to how immersion in the religious context is to be carried out. What pitfalls are to be avoided and what is the general theological approach to be adopted? The extent to which immersion is possible will of course depend on local circumstances and in Asia at present there are places of interreligious conflict, as in Indonesia and parts of India, that work against dialogue. But some general guidelines can be suggested, which are reflected in the work of the three theologians and can be applied also to developing a Christian interreligious spirituality. Pieris is surely correct when he warns against 'theological vandalism,' where ideas and practices are taken from other religions without due respect for the insights and doctrines that lie behind them. In the development of theology and spirituality, a 'pick and mix' approach is to be avoided. This presents a challenge to the harmonising and pluralistic tendencies of various Asian peoples. Scholars have noted, for example, that popular Chinese religion combines many elements of belief from different religious traditions that are not clearly distinguished but subsumed under a polytheistic framework.<sup>57</sup> There is also an important warning contained in this to Westerners interested in other religions, since the influence of consumerism and individualism encourages choosing and mixing religious beliefs and values to gratify personal tastes.<sup>58</sup> As well as avoiding religious utilitarianism there is, moreover, the need to respect religious differences, to admit the 'otherness' of the other. *Satori* or *nirvana* are not God, as the three theologians agree. They may be homologous but in essence they cannot be said to be the same.

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<sup>57</sup> Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, "Introduction: Gods and Society in China," in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Though not dealing with the interreligious aspect, Kenneth Leech has outlined how consumerism and individualism have led to a false conception of Christian spirituality in the West. Kenneth Leech, *The Eye of the Storm: Spiritual Resources for the Pursuit of Justice* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 2-7.



In general, then, I would commend something that reflects the symbiotic approach proposed by Pieris and others.<sup>59</sup> In this there is the acceptance of the possibility of cross-fertilisation of beliefs and practices but also an understanding that fundamental differences do remain. Here it is appreciated that the context, in this case the Buddhist religion, becomes a source of new understanding for Christian faith by its judgement of Christian doctrines and practices, its clarification of religious differences, and its ability to enrich Christian spirituality.

Koyama, in his dialogue with Buddhism and in his general approach to theology, offers further help as to how immersion in the religious context could be approached. He enters humbly into a dialogue with the other's beliefs and practices where there is an openness to learn from them. Yet this is done with a critical awareness where priority is given to one's own religious faith. Koyama's method suggests what I believe is an important foundation for in-depth interreligious dialogue: the need to be deeply rooted in one's own religious faith in order to comprehend and appreciate the religion of the other. The present Dalai Lama, who has for many years been involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, supports a similar point of view. Though admitting that there is scope for greater dialogue and mutual learning, he warned that Christians and Buddhists must remain truthful to their own traditions and not seek to be "half-and-half."<sup>60</sup> An idea from the Christian past can be employed to help further explain this proffered approach. Living in a very different context from the modern Asian one, Augustine of Hippo spoke of spirituality as the right "order of love" within a person.<sup>61</sup> He understood that human love works on various levels, such as the physical and sensual, but that these various loves should be understood as subordinate to the love of God and directed primarily towards God. In the present context, the idea of an 'order of love' would not only refer to the need for Christians to orient their interior values and loves towards God as meant by Augustine. It would also mean that they would be open to learning from the wise and compassionate aspects of other religious traditions, be willing to allow these to judge their own theology and practices, and integrate them into their Christian spirituality. Yet, at the same time, Christians would affirm their focal love and motivating centre in the God of Jesus Christ. In this way Christians would demonstrate love and openness towards the religion of their neighbour but also be clear in showing that their primary love and commitment lay with God. An openness to the other may

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<sup>59</sup> See also Zago, "Evangelisation," 72-73; Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Gyatso, Tenzin, Dalai Lama XIV. *The Good Heart* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996; London: Rider, 1997), 46.

<sup>61</sup> E. J. Stormon, "The Spirituality of St Augustine," in *Christian Spiritual Theology: An Ecumenical Reflection*, ed. Noel J. Ryan (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1976), 137.



indeed lead to new understandings of God and Jesus, but these would have to be related to the images derived from the Bible and church tradition.<sup>62</sup>

A question arises here, which lies constantly in the background for Christians committed to dialogue: does it lead to new understandings of God and Christian faith outside those developed in the Christian tradition, or does dialogue simply reveal and enrich elements of Christian understandings that were already present? The work of the three theologians suggests that Buddhism does introduce new elements to the Christian tradition. Concepts like *sunyata* and practices such as those involved in the development of mindfulness (*sati*) point to original resources that Buddhism offers for Christians to ponder and appropriate. It is to be noted though that the examples the theologians most often provide - for instance, Koyama's emphasis on teachings related to overcoming greed, Song's appreciation for Buddhist compassion and intuitive insight, and Pieris' promotion of Buddhist voluntary poverty - can be found at least in embryonic form in Christianity. That Buddhism does appear to offer original resources that can aid Christian understandings of God and enrich Christian discipleship does not, I would argue, necessarily lead to an acceptance of religious relativism, where Christian truth is seen as only one truth among others. This point will become clearer in the later discussion on christology. It is not the case that such Buddhist resources should or even can be appropriated in their entirety, but in order to be meaningful for Christian faith they need to be brought into a critical dialogue with Christian scripture and tradition. Moreover, even such original and challenging aspects of Buddhism like *sunyata* and meditation practices find some correspondence to strands of Christian thought and practice in apophatic theology and the life of Christian mystics.<sup>63</sup>

The three theologians are helpful in showing how theology should have a more humble and serving role. They explain that the negative pre-judgement of Asia's religions and cultures by Western theology and missionaries in the past was unacceptable, and caused the Christian religion to lose the respect and interest of the Asian people. Theologising, they argue, must fundamentally be a listening and a learning process in Asia. It must be able to synthesise what has been learned from

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<sup>62</sup> Hindus have engaged in this process for many years. They were the first Indians to interpret the significance of Jesus in relation to their own philosophical and ethical traditions. This may have helped Christians to understand new facets of Christ not emphasised or understood clearly before, such as Mahatma Gandhi's portrayal of Jesus as a non-violent resistor. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the Indians interpreted Jesus through their own Hindu religious lens. For various Hindu interpreters of Jesus and a Christian response to their thoughts see M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1970).

<sup>63</sup> Such correspondence between Buddhist and Christian thought and practice is the subject of the book by Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (1995).

others, but also be critical in testing this in relation to central demands of the Christian faith.

The acid test of immersion comes in such circumstances as mentioned earlier, in interreligious marriages and the bringing up of children. In such cases, much would depend on how rooted the parents were in their religious traditions. If they were sincerely practising their own religion and held a mutual respect towards each other's tradition, then it is conceivable that children could be brought up within both traditions. Children might benefit from such an interreligious upbringing. It would broaden their religious horizons, even if at one stage they would show a preference for one of the religions. This in itself would be a powerful community witness to the need for dialogue and mutual respect. Yet the difficulties on the ground would be immense in Asia. All sorts of pressures from family, friends, religious communities and others might be exerted to prevent and confuse such an experiment. A Christian women, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, for example, tells of how the Roman Catholic Church in India has looked disapprovingly upon her marriage to a Hindu man and their desire to develop an interreligious spirituality; a disapproval which, she reports, is felt by many other Christians in mixed marriages.<sup>64</sup> Other problems might arise. For example, children brought up in two traditions could become confused in their religious identity, wondering where their primary commitment lay. Also, families would need to respect the decision of their children if, as they grew up, they developed a preference to follow one religion over the other. In addition, there is the fact that religions, and Christianity is strong on this point, do in the end require a certain exclusive commitment from their followers that would make a double identity difficult to sustain.<sup>65</sup>

Interreligious marriages and the bringing up of children in an interreligious atmosphere are special cases that demand much discernment by couples and the support of their religious communities if they are to succeed and become more generally accepted. The important point it seems is not to aspire to some contrived interreligious ideal of double identity where all is harmony and light. From the Christian perspective, the reason for immersion needs to be kept in mind. It is in

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<sup>64</sup> Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "My Marriage is Not a Sacrament," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 161-178.

<sup>65</sup> From my own experience as a pastor in rural Thailand where I counselled several Buddhist-Christian married couples, it was always stressed that if a child was to be baptised this had to be the joint decision of the couple and it would mean that the child would be primarily brought up in the Christian faith. In this case it was explained that it would be improper for parents to press the child, if a boy, to later become a Buddhist monk as custom dictated. An alternative, of having a child blessed and leaving the decision of which religion to follow until later on, was also offered.

order to be more aware of God's loving and liberating presence in the context and to integrate what is learned from this into Christian discipleship with its concern for the poor. The task then is to find ways forward where a critical dialogue can take place and human relationships strengthened. The three theologians in various ways have shown that this is possible.

To end this discussion on immersion in the Asian context it is worth mentioning one important area that requires more theological research and understanding: the primal religiosity of Asian people.<sup>66</sup> Koyama refers to the cosmological approach of Asian people and Song uses the folktales of East Asians in his theology, but there is still a need for a greater appreciation of religious life and meaning at the level of ordinary people's lives. Pieris has spoken of this need and admits that it is something to which Asian theologians have so far given insufficient attention. Evangelical Christians, especially Pentecostals, have taken the primal religiosity of the people more seriously. Harvey Cox has recognised the potential for Pentecostals to open up new ways of interreligious dialogue through their emphasis on experience over dogma, and the ways in which their stress on the work of the Holy Spirit links in naturally with people's beliefs in powerful spirits.<sup>67</sup> Yet primal beliefs are looked upon negatively and with hostility by Pentecostals. A more serious engagement with the primal religiosity of Asian people is required. This would ensure that positive aspects of their primal religiosity are affirmed and learned from, such as the concern for the environment and community life. It would also enable Christians to explore the differences that exist and avoid the problem seen in 'kitchen theology' where people's indigenous beliefs were superimposed unconsciously onto their Christian faith.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> I referred earlier to the lack of research into primal religiosity as being a major criticism against Koyama by Hwa Yung. While stating that this criticism is not entirely fair, I believe that Asian ecumenical theologians have still not paid enough attention to primal religiosity.

<sup>67</sup> Harvey Cox, "Jesus and Pentecostals," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 55-60. The need for more mainline church dialogue with Pentecostals and also primal religiosity in Asia is argued by Philip L. Wickeri, "Dialogue and Resistance: Mission in the Context of Globalization," *CTC Bulletin* 16, no. 1 (1999): 61-63.

<sup>68</sup> Moonjang Lee argues that a primary theological task for Asian theology is to have a better understanding of how Asians filter Christian beliefs through their indigenous belief systems. Lee, "Identifying an Asian Theology," 268. An interesting recent study of primal religiosity in China from a Christian perspective can be found in Lun, "A Snapshot of Chinese Village Spirituality," 173-182. Jyoti Sahi is a theologian who has been looking at the positive aspects to be learned from primal religiosity in Asia: Jyoti Sahi, "Who is God for us Today?" in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 90-96.

### 6.3.3 Asian Liberation Theology

#### *Introduction*

The final area of theological interest that emerges from the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism, which includes a number of theological challenges and areas of dispute, is related to the development of liberation theology in the Asian context. Various liberation theologies - Latin American and feminist in particular - have been influential in the development of Asian theology. The three theologians are themselves described by commentators as liberation theologians. As in other liberation theologies the poor and oppressed stand at the heart of the theologians' concern. However, they also weave another aspect into this concern: dialogue with the religions and cultures of Asian people.<sup>69</sup>

The development of Asian liberation theology has been at the centre of Pieris' theological discourse as explained in the previous chapter. More than the other two, he emphasises the liberative thrust to be found in both the Christian gospel and Asian religions. In Buddhism he found a liberative tradition and way of life that complemented Christian soteriology. He was perhaps not the first to link the need for a social commitment with interreligious dialogue in Asia, but his genius has been in bringing the two aspects together and showing how these form a cohesive and radical Asian theology.<sup>70</sup> In doing this he has been influential in inspiring a number of theologians towards developing an Asian theology of liberation along the lines he proposes.<sup>71</sup> Liberation, then, comes to dominate and define the theological task in Asia.

In general, both Song and Koyama support the liberative agenda of Pieris. The need for both socio-ethical commitment and interreligious dialogue in order to discern God's liberative work in Asia is stressed by Song. Koyama agrees with this

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<sup>69</sup> Pieris tends to speak of religions only. The FABC make a distinction between cultures and religions and both Song and Koyama speak of cultures as well as religions in their work. It is difficult to separate cultures from religions in Asia, though at times it can likewise be difficult to discern the religious meaning of cultural practices. This was impressed upon me in Thailand where religious rites arising from the rural people's primal religiosity were traditionally carried out at funerals, the building of a new house, or the planting and harvesting of rice. It was often apparent that the religious meaning of these rites had been forgotten and that they were done more out of custom and from a general sense of duty than entered into as a clearly understood religious act. It is perhaps best then to distinguish between cultures and religions, but it must be understood that in Asia religion and culture are inextricably related.

<sup>70</sup> In the opinion of one commentator, the FABC pre-date Pieris in their Asian liberative concerns. See Mariampillai, *The Emerging Asian Theology*, 449.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see the appreciation of Pieris' insights in Frank J. Balasundaram, *Contemporary Asian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 107-129; and in various places in Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980).



but, in addition, he also recognised the liberative message contained in Buddhist monastic practices, especially the commitment to simplicity of lifestyle. It is Pieris, however, who takes a step further by personally delving into the ascetic traditions of Asia and explaining how these expand the Christian understanding of liberation.

Liberation theology is one of the most important theological movements across Asia. A number of recognised liberation theologies have developed over recent decades, which include Minjung (Korea), Dalit (India), and Feminist (pan-Asian) theologies.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the FABC and CCA have shown a consistent concern to develop a more liberative agenda in Asian theology.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Defining the Missionary Task***

The liberation theology put forward by Pieris, and supported in their own ways by Song and Koyama, is a missionary theology. It seeks to define the missionary task of the church in Asia and to impress the need for new theological thought in light of contextual realities. The missionary model proposed, where interreligious dialogue and a commitment to the poor are central, stands in a collision course with more traditional models from the Roman Curia and Evangelical circles, where the stress is on church expansion and the need for personal conversion to belief in Christ.<sup>74</sup> Rather than claims about the divinity of Christ the three theologians highlight the life he lived and the message he preached. It is the liberation that Christ embodies through his life and ministry rather than his presupposed divine status that is seen to be salvific. This liberation is understood foremost in socio-ethical terms and as an inner experience of selflessness, to which interreligious dialogue contributes new insights and enables the development of a common mission against social injustice and interior selfishness. The three theologians hold, then, that the missionary does not bring God to Asia. Mission is not primarily a matter of proclamation by words to

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<sup>72</sup> Examples of these theologies: David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ* (Hong Kong: Commission on Theological Concerns of the CCA, 1991); Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute 1991 [?]); Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology Editorial Team: Lee Oo Chung, Choi Man Ja, Sun Ai Lee-Park, Kim Elli, Mizra Rodriguez, Debra Goodsir, *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible* (Seoul: Asian Women's Resource Centre, 1992).

<sup>73</sup> The CCA concern for liberation, involving dialogue and social commitment, is reflected in its earliest documents and has become gradually more explicit. See East Asian Christian Conference, *Confessing the Faith in Asia Today* (Redfern, Australia: Epworth Press, 1966), 58-81; and more recently the various articles in CCA, *Turn Around: Called to Witness Together Amidst Asian Plurality*, CCA Asia Mission Conference: Seoul, Korea 1994 (Hong Kong: CCA, 1995). Mariampillai, *The Emerging Asian Theology*, details the liberative concerns of the FABC in the last decades.

<sup>74</sup> Such a missiology in the Roman Catholic Church can be found in the papal encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*.



reach the unconverted but, like theology, a much more humble affair of listening and of service, constituted by identification with the poor and dialogue with their religions.

The above understanding of the missionary task raises important challenges to the church. Through dialogue with Buddhism the three theologians argue that the socio-ethical dimension to the reign of God is a primary element of salvation, and not a mere consequence of an explicit faith in Jesus. So the socio-ethical concern to be found in Buddhism and other religions is seen as a profound reflection of God's will and love, to be recognised as so by Christians. Proclamation of the gospel, in the light of this understanding, is seen more in terms of the way the Christian lives and relates in love and service to others than in the words used. As a missiological priority in Asia, where Christianity is often perceived in relation to the abuse of power and violence through its association with the West, colonialism, two World Wars, and modern-day capitalism, this emphasis on praxis is surely correct. For this perception (and reality) to be overcome, I stand in agreement with the three theologians that the way forward is for local churches to develop a ministry where self-giving love in identification with the poor and recognition of the good in Asian religions and cultures are central concerns. More than a methodological imperative for Asia, however, this praxis-based approach has wider significance for the Christian community as a whole. This is because the emphasis on self-giving love recovers the biblical notion that faith is not simply or principally a matter of intellectual assent. Rather, it is about a way of life and about commitments and priorities in that life, especially to the poor and to overcoming selfishness, which reveals to others what gives Christian faith authority.<sup>75</sup> It also represents a challenge to missionaries and Asian churches to be attentive to the revelatory significance of the Asian context. Through the poor and other living religious traditions the Christian community may indeed experience being evangelised first, by being made aware of God's presence within the context and being confronted by the need to be a liberating presence therein. Mission thus becomes a more collaborative and communally discerning process. In this way Christians learn that they do not own God and cannot set limits to God's liberating presence.

With interreligious dialogue seen as part of the liberative thrust of mission an important challenge arises: Christians are encouraged to move away from forms of

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<sup>75</sup> This is shared with Latin American liberation theology. Using more philosophic language, Segundo argued that faith is not simply a response to revelation but is "an *active*, indispensable part of revelation itself." Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Dogma*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 242.

dialogue that focus on doctrinal issues dominated by intellectual elites from the religious traditions. It is interesting to note in this regard that the three theologians, and other Asian theologians, are unhappy at how debates in the theology of religions in the West revolve around the threefold categorisation of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>76</sup> This for them reflects a Western bias towards philosophic categorisation that they want to avoid. It also, I believe, represents a significant warning to Western theologians to beware of placing too much store in formulas in the theology of religions, and to examine more carefully the cultural factors influencing this. Though I would defend as important philosophical efforts to understand the relationship between religions, dialogue does appear to find a fresh and more worthwhile focus in the work of the three theologians: its primary purpose turns to developing collaborative projects for justice and to providing mutual encouragement along the path of interior liberation from selfishness. The insight of Pieris, that religious differences are clarified and a deeper appreciation of each other's teachings and beliefs are communicated through collaboration to remove social injustices, is especially important here. This provides interreligious dialogue with a new centre of concern and new methodology to enrich mutual understanding. It also raises a critique of the scientific approach to religious studies in the West, which could be accused of failing to grasp the significance of the liberative thrust rooted in religious teachings and which are discovered through praxis.<sup>77</sup> It should, in addition, be noted that the kind of dialogue concerned with justice that the three theologians propose represents a different approach from the 'global ethic' associated with Hans Küng, which is less radical in nature. The global ethic seeks to appeal to people of all religions and to humanists, and therefore tries to find common ethical principles upon which all can agree. The liberation model is a much more specified ethic because of its stress on Jesus' identification with the poor. Moreover, the global ethic has been developed by religious and political elites, which is then

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<sup>76</sup> See, for example, the articles by S. Wesley Ariarajah, "The Need for a New Debate," 29-34 and by Anthony Fernando, "An Asian's View of Jesus' Uniqueness," 68-73, both in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997); also Michael Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Faith and Cultures Series, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 86-87.

<sup>77</sup> This is raised here only as a matter for debate, and which would require further research. The three theologians seem to be saying that religions cannot be profoundly understood without a participation in their liberative agenda. The role of the scholar is a hotly debated issue in Religious Studies: see Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Controversies in the Study of Religion (London: Cassell, 1999).

applied to contextual situations.<sup>78</sup> In contrast to this the liberation model stresses the need for engagement in contextual realities and for ethical responses to be shaped by the teachings of the religions as these encounter real human situations of injustice.

It is the identification with the poor, though, that Pieris and other Asian theologians see as the greatest challenge to the churches in Asia. This is not fully achievable simply through a compassionate concern for the poor and sick by establishing a medical centre or school as done by missionaries in the past, nor merely by a political commitment to their cause. As Koyama and Pieris recognised through their dialogue with Buddhism, there is also a need to simplify lifestyle, give up attachment to wealth, and to live alongside the poor. This represents an immense challenge to Asian churches, but it is, I would contend, perhaps a greater and more pressing challenge to Christians in the West. Tissa Balasuriya has argued that the primary mission field is not Asia, despite its many religions, but the West where the spirit of capitalism is so dominant.<sup>79</sup> In North America and Europe the health of the economy and material growth are seen as the most important political and social priorities. Here the values of materialism and consumerism find their most vociferous supporters and are exported to the rest of the world. The problem identified by Pieris that the poor are not (yet) theologians and the theologians are not (yet) poor is also applicable to the West. The challenge, then, is for Christians worldwide to find ways in which to live a simpler lifestyle in identification with the struggles of the poor and also as a witness against the culture of greed and constant sense gratification at the centre of unbridled capitalism. This has become an ever more urgent need with the questioning and fall of socialist alternatives and presents, I would argue, a key theological challenge facing Western Christians in the new millennium. An aspect that Pieris does not stress as much as that of the poor, but needs also to be included in any liberative mission, is a concern for the environment. This is receiving increasing attention in Asian theological circles as it is in the West.

In relation to their missionary concerns, some commentators have questioned if the three theologians give enough recognition to the person and divinity of Jesus rather than just his message and life. Commenting on Song's understanding of the reign of God, Daniel Adams wrote, "Theologically the question must be asked: What about Jesus and the reign of God when the revolution is over?"<sup>80</sup> There may be a

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<sup>78</sup> Hans Küng, "The History, Significance and Method of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic," in *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, ed. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), 43-76.

<sup>79</sup> Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology*, 217.

<sup>80</sup> Daniel J. Adams, review of *Jesus and the Reign of God*, by Choan-Seng Song, *Interpretation* 48, no. 4 (1994): 432, 434.

tendency of the theologians, especially Song and Pieris, to downplay the divine aspect of Christ's person. This issue will be explored in more detail later. It is important within the present area of discussion to state that the use of christological affirmations about the person and divinity of Jesus in defining the reign of God and salvation cannot be ignored in Christian mission.

### ***The Understanding of Liberation***

The dialogue with Buddhism, particularly in the writings of Pieris, augments and challenges traditional Christian understandings of salvation. Similar to Latin American liberation theology there is a welcome recovery of social justice as a central dimension to salvation, to which Buddhism lends support in its model of the *Sangha*, identification with the rural poor, and its own moral and ethical traditions. The ethical dimension of salvation is therefore seen as essential, and the notion that liberation can be defined in purely conceptual or mystical terms is rejected. Moreover, Buddhism is seen to aid the process of liberation and lead to its deeper understanding in the way it focuses on interior detachment, inner harmony, introspective analysis, and such qualities associated with voluntary poverty. It is not that this aspect of liberation is missing in Christianity or neglected by theologians, but it is underlined and receives greater attention in the Buddhist tradition, especially in its insights into the workings of the mind and meditative practices.<sup>81</sup> This encourages Christians to accept that the Christian tradition does not necessarily exhaust the meaning and means of achieving liberation; though, as Pieris emphasises, voluntary poverty needs to be seen in relation to a struggle for social justice.<sup>82</sup> Another aspect of the Buddhist tradition that the theologians bring out is the way liberation is conceived more in terms of orthopraxis than orthodoxy. It is not that doctrines are unimportant but orthopraxis serves a purpose in supporting the practice of the believer towards a liberative experience. As in Latin American liberation theology and Buddhism, the three theologians understand that liberative truth is

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<sup>81</sup> The interior aspect of liberation as described above is stressed in Christian monastic and religious orders. For an example of how it is positively understood in Latin American liberation theology see Segundo Galilea, *The Beatitudes: To Evangelize as Jesus Did*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 33-44.

<sup>82</sup> Buddhism's contribution to social justice in the past is a debated subject. Writers like Masao Abe argue that Buddhism has failed on this level and can learn much from Christianity. On the other hand Sulak Sivaraksa argues that Buddhism in Thailand, prior to the globalisation of Western culture and consumerism, supported a largely sustainable, simple and equitable way of life and economic activity based on Buddhist principles that the movement for Engaged Buddhists is rediscovering. Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992), 3-9.



revealed through praxis. "The truth reveals only in liberating us," stated Pieris.<sup>83</sup> Thus, liberation is seen in dynamic terms. This is to be welcomed because it avoids the danger of a more traditional understanding of salvation that tends to reduce Christian faith to an intellectual assent and the atonement to a static contractual arrangement between God and the believer.<sup>84</sup> Pieris is also helpful in showing how Buddhism represents liberation in terms of a therapeutic model where the stress is on overcoming an illness (ignorance) through a process of taking the correct medicine (the Noble Eightfold Path), whereas a traditional Christian model of atonement is more legalistic. Buddhism, then, can prompt Christians to rethink how liberation is conceived and experienced.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the benefits of putting liberation at the centre of theological discourse some contentious issues arise, especially in the area of ontology. The three theologians largely seek to avoid ontological language about God and the person of Jesus when it comes to speak of liberation. Instead they rely heavily on the message of the Kingdom of God as preached and lived by Jesus, interpreted in terms of socio-economic justice, loving relationships, personal ethics, greedlessness and inner peace. Yet when coming to discuss the essential relationship between Buddhist and Christian liberation it is clear that ontological issues naturally arise. Koyama is clearest in showing that in some mysterious way Buddhist liberation has to be understood within the greater mystery of God's love expressed in Christ. Song is reluctant to make ontological claims about the primacy of Christian liberation. However, his overarching theological framework is so centred on the love of God as found in the Christian tradition that, functionally, Buddhist liberation is understood and incorporated within his Christian beliefs. It is with Pieris' theology of liberation that most questions arise. It has to be understood, though, that his concern is not to make a doctrinal comparison of Buddhist and Christian liberation but rather to point to the liberative dimensions within each tradition. Since Buddhists experience liberation through their own teachings, such teachings in some way embody the truth. However, he does state that expressions like *nirvana* and God do not denote the same reality but are homologous. Because of his concern to show the value of Buddhist liberation while recognising that it is not necessarily the same as the

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<sup>83</sup> Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, 362.

<sup>84</sup> See the brief critique of such a theology in Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 83.

<sup>85</sup> That is not to say that there are not different models of salvation to be found in Christianity, which there clearly are. The legalistic interpretation of salvation represented by Tertullian seems to have dominated in the West, but as Pieris and others have shown there are other more therapeutic alternatives. One such model, for example, is provided by Irenaeus in the early church, which is argued throughout the book by González, *Christian Thought Revisited*.



Christian one there is, then, a difficulty for the reader to understand how liberation in each religion relates to the other. Do they come from a Christian source or are they both dependent on another source that is greater than the definitions of both religions? This uncertainty arises from his reluctance to resort to or develop ontological categories.

Pieris has sought to “expand the existing boundaries of orthodoxy”<sup>86</sup> in the theology of religions by placing liberation at its centre, rather than ontological statements about the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus. Theological problems do arise, however, with this approach. It can be questioned if the concept of liberation will not itself take on ontological characteristics in coming to define and portray God, and appear just as exclusivist as other theologies in the past. So S. Mark Heim has argued that “the liberation theology of religions in fact becomes exclusivistic in its refusal to recognise other orientations as having some legitimacy.”<sup>87</sup> Gavin D’Costa has added to this argument. He makes the point that what constitutes liberation and motivates praxis, and the justice and peace that flow from it, is not necessarily the same across religions or even within religions. It has to be asked, therefore, whose justice is being sought and what criteria are to be used to define liberation.<sup>88</sup> Theological presuppositions about the normative nature of Jesus’ person in this regard, and a clear faith commitment that flow from this, seem to be required. Commenting on Pieris’ theology, D’Costa wrote:

It is precisely in Christ and the trinitarian revelation therein that the decisive meaning of liberation is to be found. The further Pieris tries to get away from such specification the closer he gets to another but unstated set of assumptions. From where does he derive the meaning of “liberation”? Why should such a meaning be privileged and exalted above all religions and used as a judge of them? Is this not a new form of imperialism?<sup>89</sup>

Jacques Dupuis has similarly and convincingly argued that a liberational model requires a clear christocentric basis that takes account of ontological claims.<sup>90</sup> Pieris seems to uphold this view when he defines liberation in terms of the two biblical

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<sup>86</sup> Pieris, “The Place of Non-Christian Religions,” 87.

<sup>87</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Differences in Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 196.

<sup>88</sup> Gavin D’Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 231-232.

<sup>89</sup> Gavin D’Costa, “Theology of Religions,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 633-634.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 195. Dupuis argues here that Pieris’ logocentric model, where the saving reality is understood as the ‘Universal Word,’ also requires a christocentric basis.

axioms lived by Jesus. What is not clear from Pieris, however, is whether Jesus simply manifests the religious truth of liberation or if he in some way embodies this truth in a constitutive way which others, like the Buddha, do not. Until this is clarified, some commentators will continue to place Pieris firmly in the pluralist category of theologians.<sup>91</sup>

The three theologians, especially Pieris, have shown that liberation is a vital starting point for theology and Christian life in Asia and beyond. It provides interreligious dialogue with a focus on social action and encourages recognition of the liberative qualities of religions. It also responds to the context of injustice and poverty in Asia. It moves the whole debate about salvation away from an unhealthy centring on what happens after death to a concern for life, society and the world. Yet it must be admitted that, sooner or later, ontological issues cannot be avoided within the liberative agenda.

### ***The Role of Doctrine and Christology***

There is a general unease among Evangelicals and in the Vatican with what is seen as a lack of concern for traditional doctrine and christology by some theologians in Asia.<sup>92</sup> In the development of their theology the three theologians downplay the significance of dogma in contrast to how it is understood as the defining and controlling element of faith by many Christians in the West. Their dialogue with Buddhism has led them to argue against giving dogma such a primary role in Christian faith because of the damage that this has done to Christianity in Asia. Rather, their hermeneutical approach to Christian faith is based primarily on ethics and expressed in terms of discipleship. They also seek to explore new ways of understanding and presenting Christian faith that are more in tune with the Asian ethos, with its stress on orthopraxis over orthodoxy. Their primary concern,

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<sup>91</sup> For example, see Peter H. Van Ness, review of *Love Meets Wisdom*, by Aloysius Pieris, *Theology Today* 46, no. 3 (1989): 238.

<sup>92</sup> Dupuis relates how the Asian bishops at their Rome Synod were pressurised by the Vatican to develop a greater concern for the role of dogma and traditional christology in Asia and to discipline their more radical theologians, presumably Pieris included. The bishops ignored the requests. Dupuis, "Jesus with an Asian Face," 1-6. It was reported from the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC that many bishops were privately unhappy and frustrated with Rome's instructions to them to promote evangelism through the traditional means of proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus. Thomas C. Fox, "Polite toward Rome, True to Their Mission," *National Catholic Reporter Online*, 28 January (2000): 6 pages, [newspaper on-line]; available from [http://www.natcath.com/NCR\\_Online/archives/012800/012800h.htm](http://www.natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives/012800/012800h.htm); Internet; accessed 1 May 2000.

The main Evangelical critic of Koyama in this area is Hwa Yung. For examples of Song's critics see Richard Ngun, "C. S. Song's Theological Method: An Exposition and Evaluation" (Ph.D. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994); and Carver T. Yu, "The Bible and Culture in the Shaping of Asian Theology," *Transformation* 15, no. 3 (1998): 16-20.

therefore, is not to describe or speculate on the attributes of God or to develop a systematic theological treatise. Their theology seeks to understand and express where God is to be found in the everyday realities of Asia, and what God is saying in the midst of human suffering and spiritual longing. This approach, they claim, is more representative of the way of Jesus found in the gospels; a way that is more likely to be appreciated by Asians. Doctrine still has an essential role but, in relation to the mystery of God, it is seen as descriptive, metaphorical and secondary in nature. Koyama's recent words reflect this:

I understand that all faith statements are only helps and no more than that. They are the beginning, not the conclusion of faith. There is no "perfect dogma" or "perfect creed" or "perfect theology." All theology is incomplete, broken and imperfect.<sup>93</sup>

There are several positive challenges for the churches presented in the three theologians' understanding of doctrine. They place emphasis on the essential mystery of God and on the imperfect and culture-bound nature of doctrinal formulations. Other ways of speaking of God, as evidenced most clearly in Song's work, are explored: poetry, worship, people's life stories and struggles, the teachings and practices of other religions, for example. For Christians in the West in particular this represents an important challenge to recognise the limited nature of doctrines as expressions of religious truth and not to consider them as the sole determining factor of Christian faith.<sup>94</sup>

Another challenge to the traditional reliance on dogma in the West emerges from the work of the three theologians and is developed further by other Asian theologians. This is related to epistemology. Asian theologians note that Western theological methods and thinking, under the influence of a scientific worldview, are characterised by a subject-object dichotomy. It is claimed that this leads "at the religious level . . . to the loss of mystery and to the reduction of religion to controllable formulae and conceptual moulds."<sup>95</sup> The Asian approach is in contrast

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<sup>93</sup> Koyama, "Towards Human Picture Theology," 252.

<sup>94</sup> Bosch is one among many theologians who point to the ways in which the Greek predilection for conceptual thought reinforced by the rationalism of the European Enlightenment led to dogmatic formulation being given the central role in defining Christian faith in the West. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 421-422.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Hardawirya, "Mission in Asia: Theological Perspectives," in *Towards an Asian Theology of Mission*, Asia-Pacific Missiological Series No. 5, ed. Michael T. Seigel and Leonardo N. Mercado (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1995), 19.

presented as more holistic, as it “aims at achieving a unity between the subject and object.”<sup>96</sup> In this way of looking at reality progress in knowledge is not measured as:

Learning and expertise (the ability to analyze a particular segment or part of reality), but as wisdom (the capacity to relate organically the part to the whole and vice versa by a deeper understanding of the inner order and harmony binding them together). Truth is not something to be possessed, but something that appears and lets itself be seen progressively as we grow in wisdom.<sup>97</sup>

In this Asian way of thinking doctrine is seen as an imprecise expression of the sacred, whereas in the West it is given a more defining role. Knowledge of the truth is not gained by intellectual assent to specified doctrines in the Asian paradigm but by experience and practice of the truth pointed to by dogmas, which is contained within, not apart from, the person, their context, and practice of faith. So Swami Abhishiktananda, the Belgian Benedictine monk who spent most of his life in India, claimed that Indians would not be impressed by Christian dogmas, rituals or religious institutions but only when they see the life of Christ lived in the life of the believer.<sup>98</sup>

I believe it would be wrong, however, to press the contrast between East and West too far. As Pieris warns, the *gnostic* East and the *agapeic* West are not so much geographical differences as poles that are found within each person from whatever culture. Hajime Nakamura has also detailed how peoples within Asia differ greatly in their ways of thinking.<sup>99</sup> It may be, though, that such an epistemology as described above is more characteristic of the East than the West, and it can be discerned in the work of the three theologians. This being the case, such an approach to religious truth challenges Western Christians to see dogma in a new light, and to understand truth as being essentially contained in and communicated through practice of what it entails in the experience of the religious person.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology,” 270. See also S. J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 61.

<sup>97</sup> Hardawirya, “Mission in Asia,” 20-21.

<sup>98</sup> Swami Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart* (Bombay: The Institute of Indian Culture, 1969), 133-134.

<sup>99</sup> Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, rev. ed. (Honolulu: East-West Centre Press, University of Hawaii, 1964).

<sup>100</sup> Latin American liberation theology also shares characteristics of this epistemology. Both Latin American and Asian liberation theologians claim that this approach is more in keeping with the way Jesus acted. It is interesting to note that in the Vatican critiques of liberation theology there is a stress that religious truth is something that is supracultural and stands outside the context. See Peter Hebblethwaite, “Liberation Theology and the Roman Catholic Church,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 183.

Despite these epistemological and methodological differences in theology that expose the Western predilection for doctrinal expressions of the faith as culture-bound and over-philosophical, it would be wrong for Asian theologians to dismiss the Western tradition here altogether. Pieris and Song appear at times in danger of doing just this in their desire to explicate theology in Asian terms. Traditional doctrinal formulations may be criticised for being of little relevance to the mindsets and contextual realities of Asian people; they may need challenging and even replacing as Song does in his dialogue with Buddhism. But, as with Asian contextual realities, there is a need to discern the theological meaning beneath the surface of things, to understand if the culture-bound words and concepts of Western dogmas are stating matters of belief that transcend the context and have universal applicability.

Several Asian theologians have argued for appreciation of the role of doctrine and ontological formulations in the development of Asian theology, not primarily because it is a Western contribution to theology but because it is seen as a biblical emphasis.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, it is possible to see a concern for logic, doctrine, ontology, and metaphysics in Buddhism and other religions too. To develop penetrative wisdom may in Buddhism depend on practice, but that practice is always informed by having a right understanding of the nature of reality. It is not so much then a question of either-or, of Western or Asian, of doctrine or praxis; rather, it is needful to combine theory and practice in one orthopraxis. The three theologians recognise this need but, at times, Song and Pieris in particular appear to err through favouring praxis over and above doctrine.

Reading the work of the three theologians in dialogue with Buddhism exposes several unresolved christological issues. As D'Costa and Dupuis have convincingly argued, any attempt to develop a liberation theology in the modern plural religious situation must take account of traditional christological claims concerning Jesus' divinity. Dupuis helpfully describes this in terms of Jesus' constitutive nature. He wrote:

'Constitutive' means that, for Christian faith, the paschal mystery of the death-resurrection of Jesus Christ has, according to God's saving design for humankind, a universal significance: it seals between the Godhead and the human race a bond of union that can never be broken; it constitutes the privileged channel through which God has chosen to share the divine life with human beings.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the writings of Stanley J. Samartha and Michael Amaladoss.

<sup>102</sup> Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 305.



Koyama is clear that there is an unparalleled depth to the love of God expressed in the life and death of Christ. This implies that Jesus is in some way constitutive of salvation. It is not surprising then to read Sugirtharajah's comment that some radical Asian theologians would find Koyama too christocentric in his theology.<sup>103</sup> Song's christology is more complex. He attempts to avoid ontological definitions of Christ yet says that he knows God only through his faith in Jesus. Recently in an interview he referred to how the divinity of Jesus is an open question about which the biblical record is unclear.<sup>104</sup> Jesus is portrayed in his theology as a uniquely decisive and Spirit-filled person, yet the case is not made for his constitutive role. On the other hand, Song's overall theological framework, as explained earlier, clearly interprets Buddhism and other religions in a way that is essentially Christian, through the emphasis that is placed on the love of God. In a functional sense, then, Jesus appears to embody salvation in a constitutive way.

Pieris has in the most sustained and theologically challenging ways sought to develop christology through his dialogue with Buddhism. There appear in his work, however, unresolved tensions between two christologies developed in the 1980s and 90s that are worth considering in more detail.<sup>105</sup> He identifies Jesus with the poor of Asia in a christology built around the two biblical axioms. The distinctiveness of Jesus is that he embodies God's covenant with the poor in the fight against the dehumanising forces of mammon. This suggests that Jesus is a unique and universal saving reality for the world, present through the poor by option *and* the poor by circumstance, which goes beyond the concern for voluntary poverty found in Buddhism. This is suggested by the words of Pieris:

The uniqueness of Jesus (we are no more concerned with the uniqueness of Christ but with the absoluteness that titles such as "Christ" were meant to convey), lies in that his claim to be the absolute medium of salvation is demonstrated on the cross by his double asceticism.<sup>106</sup>

Yet, at other times, Pieris seems to say something different. "'Christ' (like 'Son of God' or 'Lord') is only a title," he wrote, "a human categorization by which one particular culture tried to 'capture' the ineffable mystery of salvation communicated in the person and teaching of Jesus."<sup>107</sup> This understanding leaves open the

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<sup>103</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, book review of *Kosuke Koyama: A Model for Intercultural Theology*, by Merrill Morse, *IRM* 83, no. 331 (1994): 639.

<sup>104</sup> Pan, "Song's Christology," 348.

<sup>105</sup> This tension between two models of christology is also detected by Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, 189.

<sup>106</sup> Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism," 135.

<sup>107</sup> Pieris, "Speaking of the Son of God," 62.

possibility that other names may equally take the place of Jesus as manifestations of the saving reality. So, when speaking of the Buddha and Christ, Pieris claimed:

Such titles as 'Christ' are only human categorizations limited to a given culture. What mediates liberation is the medium to which one culture as much as another can decide what name to give: Christ, Son of God, and so forth, or *Dharma*, *Tathāgata*, and so forth—each according to its own religious idiom.<sup>108</sup>

Two christologies are in tension here and they are often found together in his writings. One stresses the unique and universal nature of Jesus as a saving reality, the other suggests that he is but a manifestation among others of this reality.<sup>109</sup> To resolve such tensions Pieris needs to clarify the salvific role of Jesus in relation to the *Dhamma*, and indeed to clarify his theology of religions as a whole, something he is reluctant to do. He may prefer to live with the tension and uncertainty his christologies create, suggesting that the ultimate relationship between Christian and Buddhist truth is unresolved for him.

The three theologians make an important contribution by explaining that traditional Chalcedonian christology is not appropriate for Asia; the terminology is confusing and tends to portray Christ as a deity in competition with Asia's other gods, spirits and great religious figures. Yet it would be wrong to believe, as Pieris and Song sometimes give the impression of doing, that Chalcedon can be discarded and christology begun afresh. Chalcedon, for all its contextual limitations, represents a sincere attempt in the Graeco-Roman culture of the time to address the issue of Jesus' constitutive nature for salvation; an issue, I would hold, that all Christians must address within their own contextual realities. It cannot be right to admit insights into christology provided by Asia's gurus yet forsake the Western Christian tradition altogether. Rather, Asian theologians need to ask if the ancient christological formulas were saying something theologically essential about the person of Christ that needs to be translated through the languages and cultural expressions of Asia. Chalcedon should not of course be seen as the final statement on christology but it at

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<sup>108</sup> Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation," 173. Even Pieris' more recent use of a term like "Universal Word" to denote the saving reality does not fully explain the Word's relationship to the historical Jesus. Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia," 137.

<sup>109</sup> This tension is reflected in various ways in Pieris' theology. It can be seen in the two biblical axioms: Jesus is presented as someone who embodies both axioms, yet it appears at times that the Buddhist grasp of the first axiom is deeper. It can be found in his use of language to describe God: in some articles he speaks of God in non-personal terms like 'Silence,' yet he also emphasises the personal identification of God with the poor through the suffering of Jesus. It can also be seen in the way he emphasises the complementary nature of liberation christology to buddhology, yet it seems to present a figure of Jesus who is more complete than the Buddha.

least provides an early and essential reference point,<sup>110</sup> the purpose of which invites the close attention of Asian theologians. It can be argued that, despite deficiencies, Western dogmas contain insights into the constitutive role of Jesus for understanding God and liberation. They also reflect what many scholars argue is a biblical concern for the ontological nature of Jesus' divinity, which cannot be dismissed.<sup>111</sup>

It is not necessary, I believe, to agree with Paul Knitter's assertion that nothing less than a pluralist theology of religions, where Jesus is seen as only one among other saviours, does justice to the truths and values found in other religions like Buddhism.<sup>112</sup> Dupuis has recently sought to develop a theology of religions that seeks to link respect for church tradition, in seeing Jesus as constitutive of salvation, with an openness towards truths and values to be found in other religions that may not be evident in Christianity. He recognises the importance of combining deductive and inductive approaches to christology.<sup>113</sup> The deductive approach focussed on dogma asserts that God is truly to be found in Jesus; he constitutes the liberation offered to humanity by God in a way no other does. The limitation of this approach is that it tends to constrict the love and grace of God within culture-bound theological formulas that have been used to undervalue other religions. The inductive approach, which stresses praxis and the need to learn from contextual realities, corrects this by emphasising what is good and true in other religions and how other religions can lead Christians to a deeper and wider appreciation of the nature of God's liberation at work in the world. Yet a purely inductive approach would tend to neglect the claims of the ancient church about the divinity of Jesus, the incarnation and trinity. There is, I would argue, a need to achieve a balance or, to use a Buddhist metaphor, to adopt a Middle Way, where there is a dialogue between doctrine and the experiential insight

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<sup>110</sup> This follows a point made by Karl Rahner referred to by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 11-12. However, I do not think it is necessary to hold that these ancient formulas should form the basis of ecumenical discussions as Rahner also suggested.

<sup>111</sup> Raymond Brown argues that the earliest New Testament witness was essentially concerned with a functional christology but that this had ontological implications. In John and Paul's writing there is a deeper concern for the ontological characteristics of Jesus. Nicea and Chalcedon were in a way, then, the flowering of biblical concerns. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 150. It is argued by other New Testament scholars that the use of metaphors as christological affirmations in the Bible ('Son of Man,' 'Lord,' etc.) cannot simply be dismissed as mythical language but they contain ontological intentions that sought to affirm the mystery of both Christ's divinity and his humanity. For example, see I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 193. The biblical evidence does however continue to be debated.

<sup>112</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 6-7.

<sup>113</sup> Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 17-18.

that arises from praxis in the multireligious context. It could then be proposed that Jesus is truly God, that he reveals the nature of salvation and that all salvation is related through him, his life and witness. Yet at the same time it could also be proposed that not all of God is in Jesus, and this leaves room for new discoveries of God's work in other religious traditions and their religious founders. In the words of Michael Amaladoss: "Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is more than Jesus."<sup>114</sup> This, of course, still leaves many theological questions unanswered, especially the relationship between Jesus' constitutive role in salvation and other religious truths that lie outside the biblical witness.<sup>115</sup> It also has implications for a Christian understanding of the trinity, requiring a distinction to be made between the 'immanent' and 'economic' trinity which, though understood as inseparable, can no longer be seen as one and the same.<sup>116</sup> In the end, for all the attempts in recent years to develop christologies in relation to a theology of religions, it has to be agreed with David Bosch that Christians "live within the framework of penultimate knowledge" in this area.<sup>117</sup> There is a tension that needs to be lived: an unresolved tension between the Christian's trinitarian confession and the recognition of the liberative truths in other religions.

To end this section it is only proper to consider the challenges that emerge from the liberation christologies of the three theologians. This will avoid giving the impression that the above critique is of more significance than the challenges coming from these christologies. Out of the work of the three theologians new images of Jesus begin to emerge, though these are not spelled out in detail. The images of Christ as liberator and suffering servant are perhaps strongest and common to all three. With Koyama, and especially Pieris, the liberator image is complemented by the portrayal of Jesus as a renouncer, which emerges out of dialogue with the monastic traditions of Buddhism.<sup>118</sup> As Pieris has stated, given time, interreligious dialogue will enable other images of Jesus to evolve out of the Asian context. Asian

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<sup>114</sup> Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions," 95. In footnote 12 of this article, p. 102, Amaladoss points to other theologians who share this approach including Panikkar, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Dupuis.

<sup>115</sup> Some have suggested that a way forward in the area of theology of religions is to develop a pneumatology to complement and deepen christology. See the remarks of Paul F. Knitter, "Can Our 'One and Only' also Be a 'One among Many'? A Response to Responses," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 179-182.

<sup>116</sup> This is in agreement with Hermann Häring, "Christian Belief in the Threefold God," in *The Many Faces of the Divine*, Concilium 1995/2, ed. Hermann Häring and Johann Baptist Metz (London: SCM Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>117</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

<sup>118</sup> This combination of Christ as liberator and renouncer in Asia is also referred to by Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions*, 135-136.



theologians are already at work in this area. Sugirtharajah, for example, mentions another christology, Jesus as the Wise Sage, that resonates both with the Asian religious context and biblical witness.<sup>119</sup> As has already been achieved in the work of the three theologians, these emerging christologies will surely challenge Christians to a deeper understanding of the biblical witness and open up the treasures of Asia's religious heritage.

The emphasis on service, humility, praxis, and discipleship that the three theologians' christologies invoke calls into question the predilection for philosophising and conceptualising in christological thought in particular and theology in general. They question the purpose of developing christology. For them it must be something that liberates. The words of Pieris are illustrative here. He described the reaction of Buddhist monks to the explanation of his liberation christology:

They have not renounced even an iota of Buddhism to go along with this explanation of the uniqueness of Jesus. Rather they have been deeply moved by this Christology, moved to reflect over our obligations as religious people in contemporary society. *This is what Christology should do if it is soteriology and not just ontology. It is neither proselytizing nor philosophizing, but saving and transforming.*<sup>120</sup>

The important challenge here is that christologies and theologies of religions should not be separated from contextual realities; they must primarily speak to the suffering and spiritual longing of humanity as was the original intent of Jesus' mission. This is a challenge that comes across particularly strongly in Pieris' reluctance to use ontological categories. In Buddhism there is a refusal to use ontological categories to define *nirvana*; as soon as it begins to be defined it becomes corrupted. Pieris, in Buddhist fashion, defends the transcendent and ultimately unknowable nature of God and instead points to the need to overcome the suffering that is clearly evident in the world in order to come to a mystical comprehension of God.

The three theologians are also, I believe, correct to give emphasis and priority to praxis and service in relation to dogma in their christologies. It is through the human actions of Jesus in his self-giving love, identification with the poor, confronting of unjust social and religious conventions, and openness to people's differing religious backgrounds, that the significance of his divinity is revealed and

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<sup>119</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Reconceiving Jesus: Some Continuing Concerns," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Faith and Cultures Series, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 263-264.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World*, footnote 310, p. 232. Italics used by me for emphasis.



authenticated. From a biblical and pedagogical viewpoint, then, Asian theologians are correct to stress that only through encountering the human Jesus do people come to appreciate the true significance of his divinity.<sup>121</sup> A stress on the humanity of Jesus and his message of the reign of God, as the three theologians have shown, also enables Christians to be more appreciative of people from other religions and cultures. This is what the doctrinal emphasis in traditional and missionary christologies failed to do in Asia and which created barriers to a more profound understanding of Christ. This is not to deny the doctrinal components of faith, which is why much space has been spent here on appraising the three theologians in this regard. But the role and significance of ontology and doctrine are found in a dependent relationship on the practice of faith, one that stresses the ultimate mystery of God who constantly surprises people by the depth and extent of His/Her wisdom and love.

## 6.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have offered a critique of the three theologians' dialogue with Buddhism. Despite shortcomings, each of the three has been able to enter into a creative dialogue. Pieris, it has been shown, engages in the most in-depth and theologically challenging way. Song is open to greatest criticism, not because he has a tendency to interpret Buddhism through the lens of his Christian faith - the other two theologians do this as well - but because he goes against his own commendable theological premise that a religion must be understood in its own terms and the challenges it represents must be honestly encountered.

A host of theological issues and challenges, emerging from the dialogue with Buddhism of the three theologians, have been reflected upon in this chapter. Various critiques of their theologies, notably by Evangelical scholars, have been considered. I have also raised my own concerns. In particular, I have pointed to weaknesses in the way they approach the role of doctrine in general and understand the significance of ontological issues in christology. Despite appreciation for their critique of Western theology, I have argued that the West's efforts in providing a philosophical interpretation of Christian faith, especially in relation to the person of Jesus, should not be dismissed as of no relevance for Asian theology. For the most part in this

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<sup>121</sup> This agrees with Jacques Dupuis' assessment of the methodology of the Asian bishops. Dupuis, "Jesus with an Asian Face," 1-6.

chapter's assessment, though, I have highlighted the many positive and challenging aspects of the three theologians' work. The interreligious aspect to Christian identity given prominence by them does, it seems to me, present Christians with a new theological resource, which Asian Christians are uniquely placed to understand and use. Other challenges have been welcomed because they display a contextual relevance to the needs of humanity and the planet, and also because they have a sound theological and biblical basis. These include: the theologians' critique of Western theology, especially its predilection for abstract thought and dogmatism; their basic theological premise that human experience in the socio-religious context constitutes a *locus theologicus* of revelatory significance, which is a position they have arrived at through dialogue with Buddhism but which itself enables a more in-depth dialogue to be pursued; the urgent need for a shift to a new theological focus, to be located in people's sufferings and their spiritual longings; the model of non-proselytising mission they support, with dialogue and a concern for the poor at its core; and the primacy they give to the role of praxis in Christian life. Their promotion of immersion in the socio-religious realities of Asia is welcome as a method for theological development, though practical difficulties that might arise with this approach have been discussed and more pointers to the development of this method proffered. In addition, I have argued in favour of the theologians' concern for 'liberation' as the dominant theological motif in Christian life, so long as it is not divorced from a constitutive understanding of the person of Jesus for salvation. Overall, the three theologians seek a more humble and serving role for theology and the church in their encounter with Asian contextual realities. In doing so they present important and relevant theological challenges to the Christian community worldwide; challenges that have come to light and been honed through an in-depth dialogue with Buddhism.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

#### 7.1 Précis

This thesis has given a detailed description, interpretation, and critique of the dialogue with Buddhism of Koyama, Song and Pieris. It has, moreover, engaged critically with the theological issues and challenges that emerged from their dialogue. The Japanese theologian, Masatoshi Doi, wrote:

The more our eyesight is broadened and our insight is deepened through interfaith dialogue, the greater becomes the possibility of finding new dimensions of our faith which so far have been concealed to our eyes.<sup>1</sup>

The three theologians bear testimony to these words. They have shown that dialogue with Buddhism enriches Christian faith: it provides theology with new insights into the understanding of salvation and Christ; offers new tools for reinterpreting Christian beliefs; and encourages exploration in new forms of spirituality, liturgy and mission. It is not sufficient, they suggest, for Christianity in Asia to be simply transplanted into the Asian soil. There needs, rather, to be an open and honest encounter with Asian contextual realities where the Christian faith is rethought and reformulated through dialogue with them. The three theologians have shown that creative possibilities are open to Asian Christians for the development of Christian theology and discipleship in the area of interreligious dialogue. An assessment of their theologies developed in dialogue with Buddhism does lead to a number of criticisms and raises several major points of debate. Of more significance, however, are the many theological insights and challenges which have emerged from their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Repp, "NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions," 29.

## 7.2 Encouraging Theological Development

For the three theologians, theology is seen as an imprecise and imperfect art that is ever evolving in the light of new contextual realities. Pieris, in particular, has stressed that his reflections are of a “provisional” nature as he seeks an ever-deepening engagement with Buddhist thought and practice.<sup>2</sup> In a few articles he has called for theological tolerance and freedom for Asian theology to develop. There is a desire to be free from the kind of heavy-handed theological policing that has been evident in the Roman Catholic Church under John Paul II’s papacy; evidenced recently in the excommunication of Tissa Balasuriya.<sup>3</sup> “The local churches of Asia,” Pieris wrote, should be allowed “to struggle through the same path of trial and error” that has been a feature of the Roman See in Europe.<sup>4</sup> The three Asian theologians are aware of inadequacies in their own theology as well as that of others. Only through a deeper dialogue with Asia’s religions and involvement with the concerns of the poor, they stress, will greater theological development take place. The time and commitment of Asian Christians will be required if this is to happen. It is a process that can also be helped, I believe, if they receive encouragement from church hierarchies and theologians outside the Asian context.

## 7.3 A Friendly Dialogue

This thesis has sought to enter into a critical but friendly dialogue with the three Asian theologians. Within Asia such dialogue has been carried out between theologians in the FABC and CCA. EATWOT has also contributed to a dialogue of theologies and the recent inauguration of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CAT) promises to facilitate the ongoing process of dialogue and theological development in

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<sup>2</sup> Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> The text and trial of Balasuriya is documented in Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, ed. Helen Stanton (London: Mowbray, 1997). Balasuriya has since been reinstated in the Catholic church, but he had to sign a confession statement affirming Catholic dogmas. The most recent book on interreligious dialogue and theology of religions, by another Catholic theologian, Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, has also been subject to investigation for errors by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. There are various reports on Dupuis’ problems with the Vatican: for example, see Franz König, “In Defence of Fr. Dupuis,” *The Tablet*, 16 January 1999 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/cgi-bin/item?day=16&month=1&year=1999&item=feature>; Internet; accessed 16 May 2000.

The impression given by the Balasuriya and Dupuis cases, and others, is that there is to be no rethinking of traditional dogma in relation to other religions. Asian Catholic bishops have refused, in general, to engage in a witch-hunt of their theologians.

<sup>4</sup> Pieris, “Redemptoris Missio,” xiv.

Asia.<sup>5</sup> There has been though, as already noted, a lack of dialogue between Evangelicals and ecumenical theologians in Asia, and a retrenchment of conservative theological attitudes in WCC and Roman Catholic circles that reveals itself in suspicion of theologians committed to interreligious dialogue. Much work remains to be done before a genuine dialogue of theologies becomes a reality.

Theologians from the West, especially, need to listen to the theological reflections of their Asian Christian sisters and brothers. In entering into dialogue with the work of the three theologians, this thesis has concluded that together they present serious theological challenges to Western Christians and offer insights that can lead to an enrichment of Christian theology and life in the West. Not only do the Asian theologians strongly attack and undermine central aspects of Western missionary and theological thinking, but they also provide challenges and insights in what are relatively new frontiers of theological thought: they reveal the complex nature of religious identity and interplay of religions upon each other; they promote the 'context' as a source of theological meaning with revelatory significance; they show that religious truth is to be discovered outwith the Christian tradition in Buddhism; they conceive a non-proselytising mission; and they give praxis and an all-embracing definition of liberation pride of place in defining and communicating Christian faith. Their reflections in these areas reach to the heart of Christian life and witness in the West as much as in Asia, thus confirming the need for a dialogue of theologies across continents for the development of a 'living theology' of both local and global relevance.

## 7.4 Areas for Further Research and Development

To conclude, it is worth noting some areas where further research and development is required in relation to the concerns of this thesis. A few of these have been mentioned earlier: the need for greater study of the contribution of Christian women to dialogue with Buddhism; more feminist reflection on interreligious

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<sup>5</sup> CAT, established in 1997, is an ecumenical fellowship of Asian theologians that meets once every two years. For a report of the Second meeting see Feliciano V. Cariño, ed., "Celebrating Life in Asia: Selected Papers from The Second Congress of Asian Theologians," *CTC Bulletin* 16, no. 1 (1999): 1-119. For a selection of articles from EATWOT, where theologians from different parts of the world enter into dialogue and a common Third World approach to theology is explored, see Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, eds. *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History. Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar es Salaam, August 5-12, 1976* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978).



dialogue; and greater in-depth study of Asian people's primal religiosity. There is also a need for the church in Asia to be more committed and supportive of dialogue with Buddhism. The three theologians stand in a tradition of Christian-Buddhist dialogue stretching back to the remarkable Nestorian missions in China. Despite great economic and social changes sweeping Asia, the religions, Buddhism included, are not set to disappear with the advent of capitalism and mass consumerism. There is, therefore, a challenge set for younger Christians in Asia to follow in the footsteps of the three theologians and further deepen the dialogue with Buddhism. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is a need to understand better what is happening at the grassroots level of dialogue in Asia. How is the liberation theology proposed by Pieris and the others being lived out in the basic human communities? How is it being appropriated or can be appropriated by ordinary Christians and Buddhists in their everyday lives and struggles? It is surely here, at the grassroots level, that an Asian theology with interreligious dialogue at its centre needs to prove its feasibility and worth.

## Glossary of Buddhist Terms

All terms are in Pali unless otherwise stated: Chin. = Chinese; Jap. = Japanese; P. = Pali; Skt. = Sanskrit; Th. = Thai.

<i>Abhidhamma Pitaka</i>	One section of the Pali canon (see <i>ti-ratana</i> ) consisting mainly of philosophical and analytical reflections on the Buddha's <i>Dhamma</i> .
<i>abhinikkamana</i>	Renunciation; forsaking family life for the homeless life.
<i>Agganna Sutta</i>	Scripture in the <i>Sutta Pitaka</i> where the Buddha relates a myth about the beginning of the world to argue against Brahmin claims to be the best caste.
Amitabha (Skt.) (Jap. Amida)	The 'Buddha of Infinite Light' of Pure Land Buddhism.
<i>anatta</i>	No-soul; no-self; without a self-existing ego-entity.
<i>anicca</i>	Impermanence.
<i>arahant</i>	'Worthy/Holy One': the saintly person in the Theravada tradition who has attained enlightenment.
<i>ariya-sacca</i>	The Four 'Noble Truths' taught by the Buddha.
<i>atthangika-magga</i>	The Noble 'Eightfold Path': right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view, right thought.
Avalokitesvara (Skt.) (Jap. Kannon; Chin. Kuan-yin)	The 'Bodhisattva of Compassion'.
<i>bhavana</i>	Mental development; meditation.
<i>bodhisattva</i> (Skt.)	'Enlightenment being'; a being destined to become a buddha; the saintly person of the Mahayana tradition.
Buddha	'Enlightened One.' Title given to the historical man, Siddhartha Gautama, who is one of many buddhas accepted by Buddhism.
<i>Cakkavatti-Sihanada-Suttanta</i>	Discourse of the Buddha in the <i>Sutta Pitaka</i> relating a story about moral decline in society and the rise of a righteous monarch. The future Buddha, Metteyya, is mentioned in this text.
<i>dana</i>	Almsgiving; generosity.
<i>Dhamma</i> (Skt. <i>Dharma</i> )	Truth; the teaching of the Buddha; elements of reality; object of the mind.
<i>Dharmakaya</i> (Skt.)	'Truth Body' of a buddha, representing the eternal truth and essence of the universe. See <i>Trikaya</i> .

<i>dosa</i>	Hatred; aggressiveness.
<i>dukkha</i>	Unsatisfactoriness; pain; sorrow; suffering.
<i>garbhadhatu</i> (Skt.)	‘Womb treasury.’ A complex Mahayana concept that refers to the potential for buddhahood through the development of compassion.
Gotama (Skt. Gautama)	Family name of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama.
<i>karma</i> (Skt.) (P. <i>kamma</i> )	Action; wholesome and unwholesome volitional actions that cause rebirth and determine human destiny.
<i>karuna</i> (Th. <i>karunaa</i> )	Compassion.
<i>köyi</i> (Chin.)	The evaluation and formulation of Buddhist terms through Chinese philosophical and religious thought.
<i>Kutanada Suttanta</i>	A discourse of the Buddha in the <i>Sutta Pitaka</i> where the Buddha explains the nature of true sacrifice, in contrast to Brahmin practise; no animals are to be hurt and offerings are to be made for the general welfare of all people.
<i>lama</i> (from Tibetan <i>blama</i> )	‘Higher One’: a spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism.
<i>lobha</i>	Greed.
<i>Lotus Sutra</i>	One of the most important Mahayana scriptures.
<i>mae chi</i> (Th.)	Often translated as ‘nun’; more literal translation is ‘female ascetic.’
<i>magga</i> (Skt. <i>marga</i> )	Path; way.
Mahayana (Skt.)	‘Great Vehicle’: Buddhism of North and East Asia.
<i>metta</i> (Skt. <i>maitri</i> , Th. <i>meedtaa</i> )	Loving-kindness.
<i>metta bhavana</i>	Meditation on loving-kindness.
Metteyya (Skt. Maitreya)	The name of the future buddha.
<i>moha</i>	Delusion.
<i>Nembutsu</i> (Jap.)	Repetitive chant expressing trust in Amitabha Buddha.
<i>nirvana</i> (Skt.) (P. <i>nibbana</i> )	The ultimate goal of Buddhist practice; release from <i>samsaric</i> existence; the overcoming of greed, hatred and delusion.
<i>Nirmanakaya</i>	‘Transformation Body’ of a buddha. The historical body of a buddha. See <i>Trikaya</i> .
<i>pabaja</i> (or <i>pabbajja</i> )	‘Going forth’: renunciation of worldly ties; entering the Buddhist noviciate.
Pacceka-Buddha	‘Independently Enlightened One,’ who comes to self-realisation of <i>nirvana</i> without having heard a buddha’s

(Skt. Pratyeka-Buddha)	teachings.
Pali	Sacred scriptural language of the Theravada. Possibly a lost Northern Indian dialect.
<i>panna</i> (Skt. <i>prajna</i> )	Wisdom.
<i>paticcasamuppada</i>	The doctrine of dependent origination.
<i>phi</i> (Th.)	Spirit(s) in Thai primal religiosity.
<i>Prajnaparamita</i> (Skt.)	The 'Perfection of Wisdom' scriptures/ teachings.
<i>raga</i>	Lust; greed; synonym of <i>lobha</i> .
Sakyamuni	'Sage of the Sakya clan': title given to Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha.
<i>Sambhogakaya</i> (Skt.)	'Bliss Body' of a buddha, existing in the celestial spheres. See <i>Trikaya</i> .
<i>samsara</i> (Skt.)	The endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
<i>sangha</i> (Skt. <i>samgha</i> )	The 'congregation' of Buddhist disciples, usually referring to monks and nuns.
<i>sati</i> (Skt. <i>smṛti</i> )	Mindfulness.
<i>sati-paṭṭhana</i>	A meditation practice on the four 'foundations of mindfulness': body, feelings, mind, and mind objects.
<i>satori</i> (Jap.)	Enlightenment; awakening.
Siddhartha	Given name of the historical Buddha.
<i>sunyata</i> (Skt.) (P. <i>sunnata</i> )	Emptiness; voidness.
<i>sutta</i> (P.) <i>sutra</i> (Skt.)	'Thread': discourse; scriptural text.
<i>suttanta</i>	Discourse; scriptural text.
<i>Sutta Pitaka</i>	One section of the Pali canon (see <i>ti-ratana</i> ) containing the discourses of the Buddha and some discourses of his disciples.
<i>tanha</i>	Craving; greed; inordinate desire.
Tantric Buddhism	Form of Buddhism found in Tibet and Mongolia.
Tathagata	One who has 'thus gone' or 'thus come'; epithet of the Buddha used by him to describe his own person.
Theravada	'Doctrine/Way of the Elders.' The name given to the dominant Buddhist tradition found mainly in South East Asia.
<i>ti-lakkhana</i>	The 'three marks of existence' consisting of <i>anicca</i> , <i>dukkha</i> , and <i>anatta</i> .
<i>ti-pitaka</i>	'Three Baskets': the three divisions of the Pali canon consisting of the Buddha's and his disciples' discourses ( <i>Sutta Pitaka</i> ), the monastic rule ( <i>Vinaya Pitaka</i> ), and

	philosophical treatises by early monks ( <i>Abhidhamma Pitaka</i> ).
<i>ti-ratana</i>	The 'Three Jewels' or 'Three Gems' of Buddhism: the Buddha, <i>Dhamma</i> , and <i>Sangha</i> .
<i>Trikaya</i> (Skt.)	Three Bodies of the Buddha doctrine, consisting of <i>Nirmanakaya</i> , <i>Sambhogakaya</i> , and <i>Dharmakaya</i> .
<i>upaya kausalya</i> (Skt.)	'Skilful means,' by which the Buddha leads people of different mental dispositions to enlightenment.
Vajrayana (Skt.)	'Diamond' or 'Thunderbolt Vehicle': name given to Tantric Buddhism.
<i>vimokkha</i>	Liberation; deliverance.
<i>Vinaya Pitaka</i>	One section of the Pali canon (see <i>ti-ratana</i> ) mainly relating to monastic rules for monks and nuns.



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<sup>1</sup> This bibliography is divided into seven main sections. In the first four sections - Asian Theological Works and Related Studies, Buddhist Works, Christian-Buddhist Related Works, General Works - works are listed alphabetically according to author. Each of the last three sections relates to one of the three Asian theologians and is split into three parts. The first part lists books and the second part lists articles written by the theologian in chronological order. The third part contains commentaries on the theologian's work and related studies, which are arranged alphabetically by author.

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